

6

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

The
Crimson
Witch and
the Undead
King

Full Clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with **Zero Believers**



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Prologue: Makoto Takatsuki's Breakfast

I opened my eyes to the dull orange glow of the ceiling light.

Sleepily, I looked around my room. A dim shaft of light was poking in through the blinds. The floor was covered in scattered game cases and manga volumes, and there was a neat pile of textbooks and reference books on the desk.

The clock on the desk read 6:35.

Honestly, I'd had enough of the dreary sight of my room.

I should get ready for school.

I wandered down to the living room. No one else was around. *Did my parents even come home last night?* They both started early and always got back after the last train.

Actually...it was more frequent that they just didn't get home at all. There was an envelope on the desk with several notes inside it—that was my allowance for the week...which meant it must have been Monday.

Man, I was tired. *Did I stay up all night gaming?* I wondered. That must have been why I was so exhausted. I didn't remember beating the game either. That demon lord boss had been too hard. It was undead, and every time I killed it, the thing revived. How was I supposed to deal with that?

Getting breakfast ready is too much effort...

I wasn't particularly hungry, but I wouldn't be able to concentrate in class if I didn't eat. Sasa would call me dead-eyed as well.

With that in mind, I took the remote and flicked on the TV.

There was a news segment on entertainment, but I couldn't muster up any interest. I changed the channel and found a weather forecast. It was going to rain today.

Ah, damn it. I'll need an umbrella...wait, umbrella? It's been ages since I last used one...

Right. I didn't need an umbrella. I never used to like the rain, but I didn't mind it so much anymore. After all—

“Makoto! How long are you going to sleep in?!”

The door slammed open, allowing Lucy—wearing the Eastern Shinagawa Public High School uniform—to barge in, shoes still on her feet.

At least take those off!



“Come on! It’s breakfast time. If you don’t get up...” Her voice trailed off.
“Hey, what’s going on? You’ve got a weird look on your face.”

I felt laughter bubbling up within me at the strange sight of Lucy—with her bright red hair and long elven ears—wearing the school uniform.

It took me a while to notice...but I must be dreaming.

“Seriously...what gives— Kyah!” she cried.

I grabbed hold of her. This was a dream after all, so it was fine.

Great... That’s right. I’m not in my old world anymore.

I tightened my hug.

“How long are you going to hold on to her for?!” Lucy’s voice suddenly demanded. This was followed by a sharp blow to my head.

“Mhmm?”

The pain brought me back to reality. I looked up and saw that Lucy was now standing off to the side, glaring at me as I reeled in the aftermath of a slap to my head. And...Princess Sophia was actually the one in my arms. She had an awkward look on her face.

“U-Umm...” she stammered. “You need to get up soon, Hero Makoto.” Her face was pink as her breath drifted across my ears.

Why is she here? I wondered, racking my brain for the details. But then, I remembered.

We’d gotten back from Cameron last night. This was my home in Macallan. I’d been dreaming, and now I was wide awake.

“Morning, Sophia,” I mumbled.

“Good day, Hero Makoto. I appreciate your passion so early in the morning, but please do these things around fewer people.” Her statement prompted me to quickly release her from the hug. “Breakfast is ready. I will wait in the dining room.”

Despite her embarrassment, the princess left the room with an elegant smile...leaving Lucy behind, glaring at me.

“So...you should wash that lousy face,” she griped.

“Ah, right.”

She couldn't hide her displeasure... Her arms were crossed. And, of course, she was wearing her usual outfit, not a school uniform.

She was cute in that uniform, though... I thought, the image still fresh in my mind.

“What's with that look?” she snapped, her voice sharp. “Was holding Princess Sophia really *that* comfortable?”

“I thought it was you, actually.”

I only realized what I'd said after the words had left my lips. What kind of excuse was that? Was I trying to be a player? However, Lucy's expression morphed into one of delight.

“What?! R-Really? Hm, you're so hopeless.” She climbed onto the bed, combing her hair back with her fingers to hide her nerves.

“Uh, L-Lucy?”

“See, you can get it right this time. Hug me as much as you like.” As she spoke, she slipped her hands behind my neck, bringing our faces closer together...

Suddenly, I heard another voice. “Luuuu? What are you and Takatsuki doing?” *Sense Danger* pinged in my head. I glanced over at the door and saw Sasa standing there, knife in hand, staring our way.

Scary!

“Breakfast's ready!” Sasa said loudly.

“R-Right. Don't get mad, Ayaaa.”

“Jeez, Lu, no trying to get ahead.”

“I'm sorry!” Lucy replied hurriedly.

At that, the two girls headed out to the living room.

Guess I may as well get up.

I used water magic to wash my face before pulling on the now-dry clothes from yesterday. Then, I polished my dagger with a cloth and offered my prayers to Noah. In exactly forty seconds, I was finished.

I strode into the next room, which was pulling double duty as both the living room and dining room.

“Morning, Sasa.”

“Morning, Takatsuki!”

She turned around in her pink apron, smiling. Her hair was pulled back and tied up. That apron was actually something she’d made herself, and it was fastened with a big ribbon at her waist. She really was impressive.

“You’re late, my knight!” Furiae protested, tapping her chopsticks against her bowl.

Where’d you learn that? It’s rude, quit it.

By contrast, Princess Sophia was calmly drinking tea. The sheer lack of balance to the scene was honestly pretty amusing.

“Okay, everyone, eat up!” Sasa exclaimed.

We chorused our thanks and tucked into the meal. Unlike my dream, this wasn’t a gloomy living room where I was all alone—no, I was sitting at a cheery dining table with lots of people.

I was glad I’d been asleep. This world is better than my old one.

Well, you say that, Noah chimed in, but the girls at the table are all fighting over you. You might end up getting stabbed.

Goddess...please don’t tempt fate so early in the morning.

Well, who cares? After all, you’re so populaaar.

Her voice seemed sulky. I needed to calm her down before starting breakfast.

You don’t seem happy. Are you angry?

Not really.

Well, Noah, you’re still special to me.

Heh, I see. Guess that's fine, then.

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Prepares to Travel

Noah's cheer had perked me up, so I turned to my breakfast. There was a variety of food on the table: White rice—cooked by Sasa in an earthenware pot.

Grilled fish—a cheap ingredient in Macallan. They'd been salted and grilled over a charcoal fire.

Fried eggs—there were chickens in this world as well.

Miso soup with tofu and mushrooms—the flavor here was stronger than back in Japan.

Pickled vegetables.

The lineup made me almost forget that we were in another world. Raw ingredients and seasoning had all been sourced by the Fujiwara Firm. Fujiyan was exceptionally picky about Japanese-style food, and it showed in the products. Apparently, he was opening a new restaurant soon. I'd need to pay it a visit.

"This soup tastes odd," Princess Sophia commented.

"My knight, these 'chopsticks' are just sticks. They're too hard to use."

"They're cutlery from the otherworld, Fuuri. We can just use forks and such," Lucy told her.

The table was certainly lively.

"I feel bad for making you cook breakfast every morning," I said to Sasa.

"It's fine. That's what I'm here for."

I could only take my hat off to her. Incidentally, as far as the other girls' cooking went: Princess Sophia (naturally) had never done any cooking.

Furiae had never (according to herself) lifted anything heavier than a spoon.

Lucy could only grill things...and she burned them really easily.

As for me? Well, I had the *Cooking* skill...but I hadn't used it at all since

coming to this world.

I was so glad we had Sasa.

“I’ll make you miso every day≡” she gushed.

“Thanks, that’s great.” I didn’t really remember getting to have miso soup every morning in my old world. Japanese food really is perfect for breakfast.

“Strange... I feel like I shouldn’t let that comment pass,” Princess Sophia murmured.

“I feel the same way,” Lucy agreed. “Aya, what did you mean by that?”

“Hmm? Nothing really.”

Ahhh, the soft sun, warm food, and pleasant conversation...

“It’s so relaxing...” I commented.

“The threads of fate are twisting right in front of me, though...” Furiae commented.

“Huh?” I looked over at her, confused. “What d’you mean, Princess?”

“My congratulations...” Furiae just stared at me coldly.

What gives? You could at least tell me clearly...

Breakfast was drawing to a close. Lucy speared an egg with her fork, then asked, “Hey, Makoto? We’re going to my home in Springrogue next, right?”

“Yeah.” The goddesses had indeed given me a revelation, telling me to make Springrogue our next destination. “We can head out in a few days.”

“Lu’s home...” Sasa mused. She turned to Lucy. “What’s it like?”

“It’s called Canaan, and it’s just a normal elf settlement. There aren’t even a thousand people living there.”

“Canaan?!” Princess Sophia exclaimed, clearly shocked. “As in, the village that the Crimson Witch hails from? Do you know her?”

“She’s...my mother,” Lucy answered.

“What?!” Sophia seemed even more surprised. “You’re her daughter?! We can get her help with the Northern Front Plan!” Her eyes were sparkling. It was

honestly kinda off-putting...

“But why do we need Lu’s mom to help?” Sasa wondered. “There are other heroes and priestesses, right?”

Sasa was right—I thought our goal was just to strengthen our connections with the heroes and priestesses of the countries taking part in the Northern Front Plan.

“Do you not know of the Crimson Witch?!” Princess Sophia asked in disbelief. “She’s the strongest fighter in Springrogue...and one of the top three mages on the continent!”

Sasa and I let out impressed noises.

“You should make sure you know these things, my knight,” scolded Furiae. “Aren’t you supposed to be a hero? Even I knew that.” Considering the exasperated look on her face, pretty much everyone must’ve known already.

“I don’t want to rain on your parade,” Lucy began, “but she only turns up in the village once a year, so we won’t necessarily be able to meet her.”

In retrospect, I realized that I’d never really heard much about Lucy’s mother. *I wonder what kind of person she is...*

Princess Sophia looked disappointed. “I...see...”

“Florna the priestess lives there, though,” Lucy said, “so visiting won’t be a total waste.”

Princess Sophia and I uttered noises of confusion.

“Lucy...you know the Priestess of Wood?” I asked.

“Yeah, she’s going to be my sister-in-law. My brother’s her fiancé, and they live in Canaan.”

“You have quite the family, mage,” Furiae said, sounding surprised.

“Do you know the hero as well?” Sasa asked.

“Come on, Sasa. She’s not going to know everyo—”

“The Hero of Springrogue?” interrupted Lucy. “Yeah, I do. They were my senior in school.”

Seriously?! Who didn't Lucy know?!

"To think that there was someone so well-connected nearby..." Princess Sophia murmured, obviously still shaken. I was pretty surprised too. Still, this was a huge boon.

"Guide us around Springrogue, then?" I asked Lucy.

"I mean, I don't mind. I'm introducing you to my family, though, so you need to look sharp. My grandpa's the village chief."

"I just need to get another outfit or something, right?"

"That might work. I don't think I could put you in elf clothes, though..."

"He's just meeting your family, though," Sasa pointed out. "It's not that big of a deal—"

Lucy cut her off quickly. "How could you say that? Family is really important to elves. I'm introducing my future husband, so of course it all needs to be perfect."

A chorus of confusion, shock, and disbelief came from myself, Sasa, and Princess Sophia.

"Takatsuki, when'd you start the Lu route?!" Sasa exclaimed.

"C-Calm down," I said, trying to soothe her as she rounded on me.

"That's right. I need to introduce you as well, Aya," Lucy snarked. "'This is his ex-girlfriend' should do it."

"Hey! You've finally shown your true colors! I won't let you get away with that!"

"I-It's a joke, Aya. Just put the knife down... Scary."

"Hmmm, are you *sure* you're not trying to get ahead?"

"But..." Princess Sophia interjected quietly. "I haven't even introduced him to my own parents."

"Things are getting rather tense in our party...my knight," Furiae spat with a glare. I looked away.

Right... I guess there're a lot of things I need to do if we're gonna visit Lucy's home.

So you finally noticed.

Don't get stabbed, Mako!

Noah and Eir sounded pretty amused.

Guh. It was a divine edict, so I could hardly avoid it... While I considered that, Princess Sophia started tugging at my sleeve. She wore an unhappy expression.

"Hero Makoto, Leo will be back in the next few days. Please do not leave before then."

"R-Right."

Prince Leonardo—the boy I'd fought the ancient dragon alongside the other day—had gone back to Roses's capital for a while.

"You will also need to meet His Majesty soon."

I let the silence hang in the air for several moments.

"Right."

That was an unavoidable event triggered if I'd ever heard one. I felt like the peaceful breakfast had ended up with me standing on a minefield.

This...was *not* a pleasant morning.

"We need to talk, Lu. Come on!" exclaimed Sasa.

"Wh-What?!" Lucy stammered back. "Hey, I don't like that look! Where are we even going?"

"The hot springs! We can have a nice long *chat*."

"I don't like soaking in the bath for too long, though..."

Lucy's voice got quieter as Sasa dragged her off. Princess Sophia and Furiae were the only others left in the room now. I cast around for a topic before I thought of something.

"Princess Sophia, did you manage to get any information out of that Snake Sect member we captured? Specifically, anything about the monster

stampede?”

“No... We are questioning her, but she hasn’t revealed anything.” She bowed her head regretfully. If something was going to happen in Springrogue, it was probably also related to the Snake Sect. I wanted to get whatever information I could.

I turned to Furiae. “Princess, mind coming out with me?”

She balked slightly. “What? Me?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, pulling her by the hand. “Sophia, where is the prisoner being held?”

“In the dungeon of the church. That space is under the goddess Eir’s protection, so they are unable to escape.”

“Right then, let’s go!” I declared.

“Don’t pull so hard, my knight.”

“Wait a moment,” Princess Sophia interrupted. “I will accompany you.”

I nodded, and the three of us headed to the church.

When we arrived, we spoke with the guards and got them to let us in. The stairs down to the dungeon were gloomy and only barely illuminated with magic candles. It was damp and I honestly didn’t want to spend too long there.

“Should we really be all together down here?” I asked Princess Sophia.

“If you’re here to collect information on the Snake Sect, I should be present as well,” she answered.

“I’d really rather *not* be present,” muttered Furiae.

Soon, we reached the cell. The woman from the Snake Sect was inside, guarded by a jailer.

“Can we talk with her?” I asked the guard.

“Hero... She won’t say anything. Don’t get too close,” he warned.

I moved toward the bars.

“So, you’re the Hero of Roses,” said the cambion.

“Yup. I wanted to ask you some things.”

She was silent for a moment, glaring hatefully at me, and then she spoke.
“I’ve got nothing to say to you.”

I’d tried, but apparently, she was determined to stay quiet. Time for our secret weapon.

“Princess, if you would?”

“Sure, sure.” Furiae sighed, approaching the cell. She tilted her head up, locking eyes with the prisoner.

“Wait, that’s dangerous...” Princess Sophia tried to stop her, but I just waited quietly.

“Hey, you,” Furiae murmured. Her voice was alluring.

There was a beat.

“Who...are yo—”

“Good girl.” Furiae stretched out a hand, grazing the woman with a finger. When Furiae made just the slightest contact, the woman immediately jolted.

Furiae smiled. “I want to know your secrets.”

The change in the cambion was instant and dramatic.

“Of course! I’ll tell you whatever you want, mommy!”

Well...that was the moon priestess’s *Charm* for you. Knocked it out of the park in one try.

Princess Sophia and the guard both had their mouths agape. Later, I would find out that they’d tried all kinds of magic in their interrogation but had gotten nowhere.

“What next, my knight?” Furiae asked.

I turned to the cambion, getting right to the point. “Why did you attack Macallan with the monsters?”

“Who do you think you are?!” she yelled back. “I’m not talking to anyone but

my mommy! You can fuck off and die!”

Well, that was some abuse. How sad... Especially because I technically had *Charm* as well... Come on, Furiae, don't laugh at me.

“Would you tell me?” Furiae asked her.

“Of course! I'm so happy you'll talk to me! I'll tell you everything! Archbishop Isaac gave the order! He told me to kill the Hero of Roses! Makoto Takatsuki and his friends caused the operations in Horn and Symphonia to fail, so they needed to die! The battle itself was under the black dragon's command! I was a messenger and was supposed to notify the Snake Sect when Macallan fell!”

Her explanation came out in one big babble.

“It seems like they're after you, my knight,” Furiae murmured.

“Seems so.”

I'd...kind of seen that coming. After all, just by being in Macallan, I'd made the population increase.

Archbishop Isaac, though... That's him.

He'd been the one responsible for the blight giant in Horn, the suicide bombing in Symphonia, *and* the massive horde of monsters. He sure was stubborn. I could almost understand since he'd spent a decade on a plan that had fallen apart. Still, being a target of terrorists was far from pleasant.

“Sophia, you can use that information for planning now.”

“I-Indeed... I had not thought she would break so easily.”

Guess Sophia was still surprised. Furiae just hummed in amusement.

“I'll make a record of what she said!” the guard declared, hurriedly pulling out a notebook. We asked the prisoner a few other questions, but she didn't know anything more specific.

She did, however, confirm that there was a plan for Springroque.

Having secured the information we'd come for, the two princesses and I left the dungeon.

“Well, my job's done,” Furiae said, giving a large stretch. She peeled away,

leaving Princess Sophia and me behind.

“Where are you going?” I called after her.

“Hm. For a walk. The mage is with the warrior after all.” *Did Furiae want to join them in the hot springs?* “Enjoy your time with the princess, my knight.” She gave one last wave, then took off.

Princess Sophia and I just looked at each other.

“Shall we get going?” I asked.

“Yes, let’s.”

The information we’d gotten out of the prisoner was still on both of our minds, so we decided to stop at a café and discuss our next moves.

The owner greeted me with a customer service smile when we walked in. “Welcome, Sir Hero and...P-Princess Sophia?!” Her cheery expression turned nervous when she saw the princess, and she took down our order with shaking hands.

After that, I turned to Sophia. “Will you be coming to Springrogue with us?”

“No... I would love to, but the stampede left more of an impact than I expected. For now, I cannot leave the country.”

“I see...”

“Incidentally, I heard that you met Lady Noelle in Cameron. Is she well?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “She and Sakurai are doing fine. I was surprised that she came with us to investigate the ghost ship, though.”

“Oh my!” exclaimed Princess Sophia. “She did?”

I nodded, then recounted what’d happened in Cameron.

When I finished, Princess Sophia sighed. “That truly is a relief. I have heard that Lady Estelle can be hard to please.”

“She’s definitely something, all right,” I mused, thinking back to the youthful priestess in the Temple of Time.

“Defending Macallan against both a stampede and an ancient dragon has

certainly done wonders for your renown as the State-Authorized Hero of Roses,” said Princess Sophia. “I am personally proud of you as well...”

As she spoke, she wrapped both of her hands around mine and gave a smile.

Suddenly, my *Listen* skill picked up on something.

“Kyah!” exclaimed one of the waitresses. “The princess is so bold!”

“She’s so close with the hero!” another waitress replied.

Seems like we’re drawing attention...

I turned my focus back to Sophia, returning to our conversation. “It’s an honor to receive your praise,” I replied, nodding.

Her expression turned more serious, and her voice grew somewhat softer. “I...heard something rather interesting in regards to the stampede.” Her hands tightened around mine, and she gripped me hard enough that it actually hurt a little.

I have a bad feeling about this...

“Sophia?”

“Apparently...when you synchronized with Lucy to stop the stampede, you kissed her.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“It is a rumor going around the adventurer’s guild.”

They’re *the ones gossiping?!*

“So, Hero Makoto...” she was still smiling as she held my hands even tighter. “You only hold hands when you synchronize with me, and yet you kiss Lucy? I hardly think that is fair.”

You’re not allowed to make Sophie cry, Mako! exclaimed Eir in my mind.

I’m the one on the verge of tears here, goddess.

“Uhm...” I said, fumbling. “Well, you see...”

I proceeded to explain the situation to the angry princess.

“Hm,” she murmured after I’d finished. “So you kiss her to use the *Contract*.

This enables you to channel her *Fire Magic* skill, even though you only have *Water Magic*. I can see the logic at least...”

She...didn't seem wholly convinced.

But then, she seemed to get an idea. A grin spread across her face. “Hero Makoto. Every time you use *Synchro* with me in the future, you will do so in the same manner as you synchronize with Lucy.”

She's telling me to kiss her every time?!

“U-Understood,” I mumbled.

Her grin didn't falter. “It was a joke, you know?”

“What?”

A-A joke?! The princess had been a lot more playful lately.

She glanced around us, then turned back to me. “We are starting to draw attention. Perhaps we should be going soon.”

The customers certainly seemed more interested in us—or at least, in Sophia—than their own drinks. *But we're not the only thing drawing attention*, I thought, looking behind us.

A group of Roses knights was standing outside the café, and they stuck out like sore thumbs. I appreciated everyone's concern, but the gazes felt heavy on my back. The knights were guarding a princess, though, so the attention was pretty much inevitable.

“Hero Makoto, would you accompany me somewhere else?” asked Princess Sophia.

“Sure, I don't mind.” I did hope I wasn't getting in the way of her work, though.

Sophia and I walked for a while and ended up in front of an estate with a large gate.

This is...

“The Macallan residence?” I asked.

“Indeed. I thought it would be prudent to share the information we

obtained.”

“I see. It should be fine to stop by.” Chris was the next in line for the title of Macallan’s lord, and I knew her personally. Plus, her husband was my best friend.

With that settled, the pair of us proceeded through the gate.

Chris greeted us in a panic.

“L-Lady Sophia! It is good to see you!”

Maybe we should’ve made an appointment...

The current Lord Macallan (Chris’s father) was apparently unwell, so Chris was carrying out his duties as a proxy. Fujiyan and Nina were at the estate as well. We were shown to a big reception room, and Sophia’s guards waited a little ways away.

“I have information to share with the leader of Macallan,” declared Princess Sophia. She explained to everyone in detail about the day’s events and the information we’d extracted from the prisoner.

“Would we even be able to stand up to another stampede of that extent’h...?” Nina wondered.

“We need to strengthen the walls immediately,” Chris stated. Both of them sounded grave.

I couldn’t deny that I was involved as well. After all, *I* was the reason why the Snake Sect had targeted Macallan. It was all because a hero (me) was living here.

“I should be able to assign some more soldiers to Macallan,” offered Princess Sophia.

“No, Your Highness!” exclaimed Chris. “That would weaken the capital! I could never...”

The debate was heating up. Just then, my mind latched onto something.

“Do you perhaps have any ideas, my friend?” Fujiyan asked me, using his

Mind Reading skill and giving me the opening I needed. That's my buddy.

"Well, actually..."

"I-Is that possible?!" Chris demanded when I'd finished explaining.

"That *would* let us resist that horde'h!"

"You always think of the most interesting things," Fujiyan remarked with a reluctant smile.

"Lady Eir may not be willing to permit— What? It's acceptable?" Princess Sophia's face had been reluctant at first, but apparently, Eir had backed me up.

"Thank you, Eir," I murmured toward the ceiling, not sure if she could hear.

"U-Um! Why does she call you *Mako*?!" Princess Sophia exclaimed. "The two of you seem rather close! When did that happen?!"

"Ah, um... You're imagining it."

"Really?" Sophia just stared silently at me.

Eir, could you be a bit more serious with her?

Yeah, the princess was definitely suspicious. She kept up her intense gaze for a while, but eventually gave up with a sigh and turned back to Chris.

"Christina, there is something else I wish to speak with you about. Would you indulge me?"

"O-Of course!"

The two of them quickly moved to another room, leaving me, Fujiyan, and Nina behind.

"Chris has it tough'h," Nina said. "I can't help with politics'h." Her ears drooped regretfully.

Fujiyan's laugh was booming. "You misunderstand. The discussion has little to do with politics." He and I exchanged a look. "Her Highness wishes to discuss how Lady Chris interacts with her fiancé's fiancée."

"Uh... What?" I asked flatly.

“Ah, I see’h.”

What was that about? I hadn’t understood, but Nina had.

“Your situations are pretty similar actually’h,” Nina said after a moment. “I think Mister Takatsuki may have it harder, though’h.”

She looked meaningfully at me. Fujiyan would have the next leader of Macallan *and* a gold rank adventurer as his wives. The combination of nobility and adventurer certainly was close to Princess Sophia and Lucy, and Sasa.

Things seem to be going well for Fujiyan at least... Unlike when they first met, Chris and Nina are getting along really well. On my end, Princess Sophia, Lucy, and Sasa are temporarily living together and there aren’t any problems yet...I think.

“Good luck’h,” Nina offered.

“We can go for a drink when you get tired,” Fujiyan said. Both of them patted me on the shoulder.

Seriously, guys. What are you two on about?

“Incidentally, my esteemed Tackie—if you have the time, why not visit the restaurant I will be opening?”

“Your new place?” That might be interesting. “What’s it like?”

“You will find out when you visit. In fact, it is lunchtime, so why not go now?”

“I’ll come along as protection, then’h.”

And so, we left behind a message for the two still in their meeting, then took our leave from the Macallan estate.

Fujiyan and Nina led me to the shopping district.

“This is the place!” Fujiyan announced.

“O-Oh my... Is it...?”

The first thing I noticed was the smell. It was the heady scent...of boiling tonkotsu stock.

At first, there only seemed to be a counter, and I couldn't actually see a kitchen. However, I soon located it when I noticed steam rising from a huge stockpot. That pot was likely the source of the smell too.

The name "Fujiwara House" was written on a large yellow sign.

It is...

Fujiyan beckoned me. "Come, come."

I cautiously pushed the curtain aside and sat down. Fujiyan followed suit behind me.

"I'll keep watch'h," Nina said. "Enjoy yourselves'h."

I guess she wasn't going to come inside.

"She cannot deal with the scent," Fujiyan explained. Tonkotsu certainly was an acquired...smell. A lot of people weren't fond of it.

"What can I do you for?" asked a man who seemed to be running the place.

Could it be? Would the order go through?

"I-I'll have hard, standard, and standard."

"Got it."

It did?! That was the same order I would've used in Japan...and it worked!

"I will have hard, strong, and large," said Fujiyan. "Also, a portion of rice."

"Got it."

"That's three steps closer to the grave, Fujiyan," I joked.

He chuckled. "And yet I cannot quit."

"You always did like it."

It was just like when we'd drop by the ramen place on the way home from school. Before long, a steaming bowl was sitting in front of me. I gulped heavily before lifting the wooden ramen spoon and scooping up some of the soup.

Hot!

But...

It tastes great!

The rich flavor of tonkotsu and soy sauce spread across my tongue. The soup had been topped with grated (almost) garlic, which had been mixed with the broth. Everything wrapped around the noodles as I slurped them up. That was the taste!

I focused solely on eating the meal, and in no time, the bowl was empty.

Incredible...

“Fujiyan, when’s this place opening?!”

I’ll be coming here a ton!

“Well...I would like to open immediately, but there is a problem.”

“Huh?” But...the ramen was so delicious. There certainly couldn’t be any problems with the taste...

“He wants to sell these noodles for a ridiculously low price’h,” Nina interjected, poking her head through the curtain.

“Ramen is the food of the masses!” argued Fujiyan. “There is no point if I cannot sell it cheaply!”

“It’ll put us more and more in the red, though’h!”

Fujiyan slumped over.

“It’d be sold at a loss...?” I asked. I guess reproducing the flavors of Japan in a completely different world couldn’t be easy.

“The ingredients are too expensive’h,” Nina confirmed.

“The taste will be wrong if we compromise on the ingredients, though!” countered Fujiyan.

“You just want to sell it too cheaply’h!”

“W-We can make up for the loss with sides and drinks...”

“That will just lower the turnover’h... You’re the one that taught me this’h.”

“Ugghhhh...”

She’d won the argument. It was probably going to be a long time before this

shop opened...

When it does though, I should invite Sasa. I pondered this while listening to those two debate a while longer. Afterward, I parted ways with them and headed home.

“Oh? What did you get?” Sasa asked immediately when she saw me. “It smells familiar.”

Once I told her about the ramen shop, she instantly said she’d visit it too. I’d definitely been on the money.

Princess Sophia and Lucy were both looking unhappily my way, so I invited them too, and they both agreed. Bringing Lucy to a ramen place was one thing, but was it really somewhere to invite a princess?



That night, I dreamed. I found myself in an empty place with nothing else around—my goddess’s space.

I’d been hoping to come here tonight. There were things I *needed* to talk to her about.

“Oh, Makoto, you’re here,” Noah said in greeting. She looked completely unsurprised, but...there was definitely something different about her.

“Um...Noah?” I asked after a moment. “What’s with that outfit?”

“It’s cute, right?”

For whatever reason, she was wearing a school uniform. On top of that, it was the uniform from my old school.

“You got all hot and bothered over Lucy wearing this in your dream, so I wanted to try it out as well. Aren’t you happy? I’m cute, right? Tell me I’m cute.”

“Uh... Yes, it’s a treat for the eyes.” *Noah is cute, that’s for sure, but this is all just...kinda intense.*

“Personally, I think it’s a little embarrassing,” Eir trilled, suddenly appearing

behind Noah.

“Wha— You’re joining in as well?!” I sputtered.

Her facial expression was in line with her evaluation of the outfit—slightly embarrassed. Since Eir had that older sister vibe, her wearing it looked more like cosplay than anything.

“You meanieeee,” Eir whined. “Didn’t you have a request for me?”

And, of course, she’d been reading my mind... “R-Right, I do,” I confirmed.

“Seriously, Eir,” Noah griped, “could you stop butting in on our alone time?”

Eir had an elegant smile on her lips, while Noah was pouting slightly. I actually needed to talk with them both this time.

“Noah, I have a request.”

“Go ahead,” she replied.

“Can you summon that giant geez—uh, *guy* we met from the Titanea? I want to get him to build walls to protect Macallan.”

This was an idea I’d had after talking with Fujiyan today. That giant had been great at ground magic, so just building walls to protect the town should be simple for him. He’d promised to assist me—albeit only once—and I’d use that favor here.

“Hmmm, I’d *like* to help...” she said.

“Can’t you?”

Noah looked meaningfully at her side. “Well, we have a spy here, don’t we?”

“My, no need to be so rude!” Eir countered. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Oh, then I can go ahead and call him up?”

In response, Eir started humming in thought. Princess Sophia *had* told me that it should be fine during the day. Finally, Eir spoke. “If one of the gods uses their powers down there...I’ll have to come up with some excuse for Althena.”

“For Althena...?” I murmured. Althena was the name of the goddess with the largest number of believers. She ruled over justice and victory and was lauded

as a goddess that one must never defy.

“Don’t worry about that—she’s just a stubborn stick in the mud,” Noah said, folding her arms in boredom.

“I’m the one she’ll get mad at though,” Eir protested. “Well...I suppose it would be fine.”

“Really?!”

“Sure. You’re helping me out in Springrogue, aren’t you? It’s gonna be tough, Mako, but I’m counting on youuu☆”

Her smile gave me a bad feeling. It was kinda scary...

“If you’re going to put my Makoto in danger, at least tell me first,” said Noah. “Ira should know.”

“Actually, not even *she* knows,” explained Eir. “That’s why we need to investigate down on the ground. Besides, she hates you, so why would she tell us anything?”

“You don’t get along with Ira?” I asked Noah. This was the first I was hearing of it. It seemed odd, considering that she and Eir were so friendly with each other.

“It’s not that I get along with Eir,” Noah told me, reading my thoughts. “She’s just overfamiliar. Ira, though, is the youngest, so she ended up spoiled. Even a lot of the Sacred Deities are fans of me since I’m a goddess of beauty, so Ira’s jealous.” Noah brushed a hand through her silver hair with a smug hum.

So, even among the goddesses, there were all sorts of personalities.

“Yeah, even Jupiter’s after you!” Eir exclaimed. “And Ira’s a real daddy’s girl.”

“Blegh. I really don’t wanna think about that,” Noah replied with a sour look.

“J-Jupiter wants—?”

I couldn’t even describe the shock. Jupiter was the god-king of the Sacred Deities—a god among the gods that ruled the world. And...a god *that* powerful wanted Noah? *S-Seriously*... Noah was the (self-proclaimed) most beautiful of the goddesses, but the scale was still overwhelming. Hearing about Jupiter,

though...made me feel strange. I wasn't sure what this emotion was...

"Eir, don't say it like that! You'll give Makoto weird ideas. Makoto, he's a real womanizer, just trash—he already has over a thousand wives but is still searching for more! I'd never marry someone like that!" She ended her declaration with a *hmph*.

A-A thousand?! That was over an order of magnitude higher than a certain hero.

I let out a shaky sigh.

"And then there's the temple telling us all that he's a wonderful god and that he's an example to all the others," I commented.

I did remember being taught that in my lessons at the Water Temple when I'd first come to this world. Apparently...that perspective was pretty far off the mark.

"Besides, the six goddesses are all his daughters, but none of them share a mother! Would you call that wonderful? Don't make me laugh."

"N-Noah, isn't that a bit far?" I asked. After all, one of those daughters was right next to her.

"Well, he's a powerful god, but as a father...not so good," Eir remarked with a troubled smile. Huh. So he even made his daughters feel awkward. "Anyway, we've gotten off track. Good luck in Springrogue, Mako!"

"Eir, Makoto used up almost all his lifespan in the fight against the ancient dragon. Don't push him too hard."

"Oh, right! I saw that!" Eir exclaimed. "Mako used suicide magic forbidden by the church!"

Geh. She saw that? Guess there's no pulling the wool over a goddess's eyes.

"Was that...bad?" I asked.

"For your lifespan? Yes, it was. What's it at now?" Eir asked.

"Hmm, let's take a look," mused Noah.

"Noah, when did you—" Before I even knew what was going on, she'd taken

my Soul Book.

“Oof... Only five years?” said Eir.

“Makoto...” Noah trailed off for a moment. “That’s even shorter than when we first met.”

“Well, you were the one that used it!” I pointed out. Even though it’d been “offered up” as a sacrifice, Noah had said that she couldn’t control it precisely. Suicide magic was definitely scary... Incidentally, my lifespan had been up to about thirty years before, and now it was lower than when I’d first gotten here.

“Guess there’s no choice,” Eir said with a meaningful smile. “I’ll teach you the secret to lengthening it.”

“You...can do that?” I asked.

She giggled.

“It’s something only the Sacred Deities that rule the world can do. Lend me that dagger of Noah’s?” she asked.

I glanced at Noah for confirmation.

“Eh, go ahead,” she replied lightly. “Eir won’t do any harm.”

“Well, here,” I said, hesitantly handing it over.

“Right, so if I do this...”

Eir lifted her finger and began scribbling some complex symbols into the air, which were written in trails of light that shifted through the hues of the rainbow. Suddenly, the dagger absorbed the symbols, swallowing them up. It began to glow ominously.

“There, it’s done,” she said, handing it back to me.

In my hand, the dagger felt warm and alive. There were faint magic symbols now etched in a design across the surface of the blade. However, they were too complex for me to have a chance at reading them.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Well, you see...” Eir started with a chuckle before launching into an explanation.

I shuddered as I listened.

“—and that’s how you use it,” she finished off.

“I-Is that really possible?” I asked, utterly shocked. It was absurd now that she’d modified it.

“Do your best to build up your lifespan!” Eir cheered.

“Why are you giving *my* believer that much power?” Noah asked, glaring suspiciously. “What are you planning?”

“Nothing, really. Now the Sacred Deities are contributing too, so Alte can’t complain.”

“Thank you, Eir,” I said. With that detour complete, I remembered the main thing I wanted to ask for. “So, we’ll be asking the giant for help, right?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Eir replied. “Nothing other than strengthening Macallan’s defenses though, okay?”

“Understood. Noah, let him know, please.”

“I already have. He should be there within the day.”

That was fast! He’d said he’d travel the world...but he could be back that quick?! If that were the case, I’d need to head back to Macallan as well.

“Goodbye then, Noah, Eir.”

“Take care, okay? Call me if you need anything,” Noah told me.

“Good luck, Mako!”

I bowed, and then the area was swallowed in light and the two of them faded away.



When I opened my eyes, I was met with the light blue hair of Princess Sophia.

“Sophia? Good morning.” Before, I’d grabbed her in a hug while half asleep, so I had to be careful not to mess up like that again.

Just then, I realized that the owner of *this* head of blue hair was a fair bit smaller than the princess.

“Makoto!”

This time, I was the one being pulled into a hug. It wasn't the princess—the arms were much daintier.

“Prince Leonardo, it's been a while.”

“It has! I missed you!”

The prince of Roses was smiling back at me.

Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Aims for Springrogue

“We can travel together this time! I’m so happy!” the prince cheered, squeezing me.

“I look forward to it as well,” I replied. Despite saying that, I couldn’t help but look confused. I hadn’t heard anything about him coming to Springrogue with us.

“Leo, you’re bothering him. Move away,” said Princess Sophia. I guess she was here too.

“That’s right! You’re Sophia’s fiancé, which means you’ll be my brother! I hope we can be closer!”

“R-Right.” His breath in my ear made my heart speed up.

“Leo!”

“I’ll see you later, then!”

At that, the prince scampered off. I met the princess’s gaze and scratched my cheek. “Prince Leonardo’s in a good mood.”

“He’s happy that he can go with you,” she explained.

Yeah, I definitely hadn’t known about that. “So, why’s the prince coming with us?” I asked.

“Leo wants to see you on an adventure, it seems. He practiced in the capital but has no real combat experience, so I’m hesitant to send him after monsters alone. If he’s with you, then I can relax.”

“It’s an honor...but also a pretty heavy responsibility.” I could feel it on my shoulders. Still, being trusted wasn’t a bad feeling at all.

“Look after my brother, Hero Makoto,” she commanded.

“Got it.”

After I said that, I moved to get out of bed and change clothes. But...she

hadn't left yet. Did she need anything else?

"Oh, right, did you speak with Eir?" I asked, since just keeping quiet would be rude.

"I have. We discussed how best to protect the people of Roses with Iblis returning."

"Huh..." Apparently, she was more serious with Sophia than with Noah and me.

Her eyes narrowed. "I also heard that she has been in your dreams along with your own goddess. The two of you seem to be getting along *very* well."

"Nah, I just get ordered around by *both* of them."

Princess Sophia let out an exasperated sigh. "You have the opportunity to speak with *two* goddesses at once...and *that's* how you talk about it. Well, no matter. You have a guest, so come out once you've changed." At that, she left the room.

A guest?

A sharp-eyed knight was standing in the room when I arrived, clad in golden armor.

"It has been a while, Hero of Roses."

Uh... Who's this again? I think I met her in Highland.

"You're the commander of the Pegasus Knights, the Hero of Lightning's younger sister, right?" I asked.

"Please, use my name. I am Janet Ballantine."

Oh yeah, that was her name. I remembered now. But why was she in Macallan?

"I requested her," Princess Sophia explained. "I asked Princess Noelle if we could borrow some support troops for your trip to Springrogue."

"You should be grateful," said Janet haughtily. "We Pegasus Knights are best suited to crossing the Great Forest of Springrogue."

“Right... But can’t we use the airship?” I asked. It wasn’t fair to Janet after traveling so far, but the normal method of traveling in Fujiyan’s airship would be much less awkward.

Suddenly, Fujiyan spoke up from the side of the room. “That is impossible, my friend.”

“Oh, you’re here too. Why can’t we use the airship?”

Fujiyan and Nina proceeded to explain: there were several different types of dragons in the forest, and using the airship would make us a target. I guess Fujiyan *had* mentioned before that he’d set up some airship routes *around* dragon territory. Apparently, there were a lot of green dragons that called the forest home, and even Fujiyan’s ship wouldn’t stand up to them.

So there’s no choice but the Pegasus Knights...and Janet...

We’d fought alongside each other in Highland, and I seemed to remember that the Pegasus Knights had a lot of...pretty intense personalities.

Suddenly, a knight—one of Janet’s subordinates it seemed—burst into the room. “C-Commander, it’s an emergency! The town is under attack! We’re fighting back, but nothing’s working!”

“Oh.” That guy was already here?! He sure was quick.

“It’s awful, Makoto!” Lucy exclaimed as she burst into the room alongside Sasa. “There’s a monster attacking the town!”

Everyone in the room was tense.

“Ah, don’t worry. I called him.”

At my declaration, everyone present wheeled around in shock to face me.



There was a giant standing before us, gleaming in a kaleidoscope of colors. Well, at least he *looked* like the creature called a “giant,” but the anima coming off him clearly differentiated him from other monsters.

Just seeing him was overwhelming. Everyone was holding their breath, but I just walked up to him.

"It's been a while," I said, offering my greetings.

"It has indeed...boy."

The pressure from the anima was nothing like before. *Is it because he's stabilized?* I could hardly believe that I'd taken this guy on in a fight... I must've been reckless because I'd only just come to this world.

Incidentally, the knights on their knees behind him were apparently depressed that even their all-out attacks had done absolutely nothing.

It was hardly surprising, though. After all, he was a god.

"I would hear your desire," he said to me.

"I'd like you to strengthen the walls around Macallan."

"Hmm, I see... I would be willing, but in what way?"

"Huh? In, uh...a strong way?"

He looked awkward. "That is less than helpful..."

So I can't just ask him?

Just then, Fujiyan came jogging up. "I have blueprints!" he exclaimed. "Could you strengthen them like this?"

"When'd you get those?" I asked.

"I searched out architects when I heard your plan. Lady Chris approved them, so they should cause no issues."

"Show me..." The giant took a long look at the plans. "Hm, very well."

Phew! Fujiyan was a lifesaver. I'd thought that the giant could just figure it out since he was a god.

"I am not an architect," replied the giant. Oops. Apparently he'd read my mind and felt the need to retort.

"Ah, right. Sorry."

"If you would back away..." he instructed, kneeling and putting a hand on the ground. His body was already absolutely covered in anima, but suddenly, it was joined by a massive amount of mana.

It was more than even Undyne had summoned in Highland. The Pegasus Knights and Sophia's guards all lost whatever color was in their faces.

"Let it be," he proclaimed gravely.

The earth shook and almost seemed to rise up.

Actually, it didn't just *seem* to rise up—the whole town was gradually ascending and being surrounded by thick walls. Overall, it took about ten minutes, and then...

The town was completely overhauled.

Everyone—me included—was dumbstruck. Janet threw a leg over her pegasus and took to the sky. When she returned, she wore a stunned expression.

"Everyone...the town is now a fortress."

"Th-That was incredible magic," Princess Sophia stammered.

"What in the world is that giant...?" asked Janet.

"One of Hero Makoto's acquaintances, apparently..."

"He is my brother's rival..."

The two women both had looks of disbelief.

Could you stop treating me as your brother's rival?

"S-Say...my knight. That was divine rank magic..." Furiae said, her voice sounding deeply shocked.

"Hmm, well, you know..." I hedged.

I mean, it was magic used by a god... So that makes sense.

"I...have fulfilled my promise," rumbled the giant. *"Farewell."*

"Thank you," I replied.

At that, he melted into the ground and vanished.

"Man, you could have taken it easy for a bit," I remarked.

"My esteemed Tackie, his power was as awe-inspiring as before."

“Yeah,” I said, turning to Fujiyan. “By the way, I’m gonna want to buy a bunch of stuff for the trip to Springrogue.”

“Leave it to me! I shall prepare a spread.”

“Great. Are you girls coming as well?” I asked, directing my gaze to Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae.

Now that we’d done everything we could to fortify Macallan, it was time to get ready for the trip to Springrogue.



“See you later,” I called out to Fujiyan, Nina, and Chris.

“Take care, my friend,” Fujiyan said.

It was the day after the Pegasus Knights had arrived, and our group was ready to depart.

“Be careful, everyone,” instructed Princess Sophia. “Leo, listen to what Hero Makoto says.”

“I will! Goodbye!”

“You’re going to the capital, right?” I asked her. “We’ll drop by once we’re back in Roses to give our report.”

“I will be waiting.” She looked a little lonely as we finished our farewells.

“Say, my knight, what are we doing about this one?”

“Nrow!” Twi, the black cat that lived in my garden, was perched in Furiae’s arms.

“Mary, can you look after her?” I asked.

“Oh, you’ve got a pet? Sure, leave it to me.” As far as the guild was concerned, Mary was officially responsible for dealing with the Hero of Roses, so she was looking after my home as well.

Though, with that said, the totality of my belongings consisted of about a rucksack’s worth of stuff...so the rooms were pretty much empty.

“Is that not dangerous?” Furiae inquired. “She might be young, but she *is* a

magic beast. I was sure you were going to make her your familiar.”

“She is?!”

Mary looked curious at the declaration. And when I thought about it, Furiae was right—it was probably a bit too risky to ask a normal person to look after Twi.

“Guess you’re coming along then...” I said, reaching a hand out.

Twi hissed at me, pulling back. *Eh...why?*

“Nrow, nrow,” the cat meowed, cuddling up into Furiae.

Furiae peered down at Twi. “He’s your master, not me.”

The cat seemed to sigh before coming over to me and curling up on my shoulder.

Hey, Twi, you’re being a bit mean.

“Fuu stole Twi.”

“Poor Makoto...”

Sasa and Lucy stared pityingly at me. *Guys, don’t look at me like that!*

“Just you wait, black cat. You’re not even going to be able to live without me when I’m done,” I said.

“Nrow, nrow.”

Well, she didn’t seem to care. *The little so and so...*

“Are you done?” Janet and the other knights were looking at us, seeming exasperated.

Oops. Guess we’d kept them waiting.

“We’re off, then,” I waved at the people below as all the pegasi rose up and took us into the sky.

Macallan gradually got farther away, and I turned to stare at the newly formed fortress town.

It now was surrounded by thick, tall walls of stone, with a moat circling the

outer edge. Looking at it from afar, all I could see was a massive military installation, and it definitely looked up to the task of weathering tens of thousands of monsters. I doubted a stampede would just pass by, but defending against one would be much easier now.

Still...

Macallan was like my starter town.

After being whisked away to a world where I didn't know the language, and after a year of studying in the Water Temple, Macallan was the first town I'd arrived in. It had taken care of me since I was a level 2, and now, it'd changed a lot.

Isn't it a bit...over-the-top for a starter town? I was sure any future otherworlder that came here would be shocked when they saw it.

As I pondered that, Macallan shrank to a pinpoint on the horizon.

After we'd been flying for a while, I spoke up. "Janet, roughly how long will it take to arrive at Canaan?"

My arms were around her waist, and we were a few hundred meters into the air. There was nothing below us except an ocean of treetops. We were bypassing the Forest of Fiends since it was home to strong monsters, and we moved further into the Great Forest as a whole.



“You needn’t be so formal, Hero of Roses. You’re both older and more highly stationed than I.”

I couldn’t help but let out a slight sigh. Being all buddy-buddy with her felt a bit awkward since she was so intense.

“To answer your question, it will likely take around two days.”

Two days? That feels really quick for traveling to a completely different country. Well, I suppose we could go “as the pegasus flies” so it was quicker. But still...

“It’s Lucy’s home, so would it be worth asking her to guide us?” I asked.

“There is no need. The village is home to the country’s strongest fighter, Rosalie J. Walker, so we know where it is.”

Well, that must be how things were. It wasn’t that surprising, but apparently, Lucy’s mom was a real big shot. Especially if she was the strongest fighter in the country. Although, according to Lucy, she apparently spent a lot of her time traveling—Lucy hadn’t seen her in years. It was fairly unlikely she’d be in Canaan.

Our official goal—if Rosalie wasn’t there—was to give our greetings to the Hero of Springrogue and their priestess. And also...to investigate the disturbance in the Forest of Fiends.

The Snake Sect was apparently up to no good—we had to reveal their plans and ruin them if they planned to harm Roses or Springrogue. That meant...we had a lot to do. Still, until we arrived in Canaan, we were free.

What to do... I was idly considering how to occupy my time when Janet yelled, “All units, change course!” This was about the tenth time it’d happened.

“Monsters again?” I asked.

“Indeed. There is a dragon ahead, so we are avoiding it.”

I couldn’t see it at all, and not even my *Scout* skill was reacting. Apparently, Janet’s version of the skill could scout several kilometers ahead. It made sense—she’d have to be fairly impressive to lead the knights at her age.

After that, the journey continued the same way for another half a day, and we managed to avoid all monsters as we flew into Springrogue.

“Let’s make camp here,” Janet instructed, trying to get everyone settled before it grew too dark. A mage put up a barrier to ward off monsters while the others got supplies and food ready for cooking. Sasa set about helping with that.

What should I do?

“Is there anything I can help with?” I asked.

“There is not. You can rest over there.”

“R-Right...” I was just in the way! I crouched over in a corner and waited for the food to be ready.

“Makoto, well done on the journey.” Prince Leonardo smiled and came to sit next to me. “You looked rather relaxed, especially since it was your first time traveling on a pegasus.”

“I was just sitting in the back, so it was a pretty easy trip.” Honestly, I’d just spent my time either looking at the back of Janet’s head or the forest below.

“That’s incredible! Usually, people get tired when they ride pegasi or wyverns because of the fear. I was terrified the first time. Lucy and Fuuri both seem tired as well.”

I looked over at them.

“The ground’s so calming...” Lucy muttered. “The sky is scary.”

“How unsightly. I can’t even move from tiredness...after riding a pegasus of all things...”

The pair were slumped over. Like me, neither of them had ever traveled on a pegasus before.

Sasa, on the other hand...

“The plates are ready. I got the firewood prepared as well.”

“M-Miss Sasaki?! You don’t even have an axe?!”

The knights were shocked. At least Sasa was energetic. Twi was on her shoulder, waiting for food.

“Otherworlders are incredible,” the prince said, watching with sparkling eyes.

It’s probably a different reason for her than for me, though. Sasa was both an otherworlder *and* a lamia, so she had ridiculous stamina. Half a day on a pegasus would be nothing for her.

What about me, then? I guess I was faring well in part because of *Calm Mind*. The rest was probably due to the perspective shift from *RPG Player*.

Being so high up without a lifeline for so long would normally make you more scared. However, the only feedback *I* had was that the scenery’d been pretty.

I think I might be losing my sense of danger...

Not feeling excessive fear was useful, but like Noah had said, I needed to not deliberately jump into danger. I was going to the Forest of Fiends because of a revelation from Eir, so I should be careful.

“Makoto Takatsuki,” Janet called. Her eyes were sharp and her hair still shone. It was probably due to commanding the Pegasus Knights, but she didn’t look tired at all.

“Thanks for your work today,” I told her.

“You seem accustomed to riding pegasi,” she said.

“What? This was the first time. It was fun, though.” It’d actually gotten boring for the second half.

She paused for a moment, then said, “I see...” Her expression showed that she wanted to say something else as she looked down at me.

“Is...something wrong?” I asked.

“I heard you defeated the ancient dragon with a single strike, all after defending Macallan from the monster stampede.”

“Oh, that?” Had she heard about it from Princess Sophia? Or maybe someone from the guild? “Thanks to everyone from the guild, we managed to protect the town.”

“Your accomplishments were reported to Highland. I suppose that will raise your worth.” Her tone was biting.

I sighed. Was she unhappy that I’d gotten kudos because she liked her brother so much?

Apparently, though, that wasn’t the case.

“My father and brother asked if I was willing to join our family with yours.”

Prince Leonardo and I couldn’t help but exchange looks. *Join families as in...get married?*

“No! Makoto is my sister’s fiancé!” the prince exclaimed. He stood in between us like he was protecting me.

Janet snorted at that. “Princess Sophia said the same thing. Well, I don’t have any intention of becoming your wi—”

“Takatsuki! I got these fruits in the forest! Here you go☆” Sasa hugged me from behind and pushed an apple-looking fruit to my mouth. The taste was a mix of sweet and sour. Apparently, even the *fruits* from the Great Forest were full of mana.

“Tasty?” she asked.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Then I’ll have some too!”

“Hey!” *What am I, a poison tester?*

She looked teasingly at me as she crunched through the same place I’d bitten... She didn’t *need* to do that. I couldn’t help but be slightly embarrassed.

“Makotooooo.”

“C-Come on, Lucy.” She’d been lying down because of the air sickness but had pushed herself over to me. I’d already told her to take it easy.

“I want some water,” she said, looking up at me pitifully.

“Right, right.”

Ah well. As I spoke, I pulled out my canteen and poured some into a cup.

“Mouth-to-mouth would have been nice,” she complained.

“What?” Seriously, what was she thinking?

“Lu, that sounded like something silly to me,” Sasa said.

“Makoto, Hero of Roses,” came a cold voice. Janet was looking at me like I was something on the bottom of her shoe. “You have a fiancée but are playing around with other women like this...quite daring, I must say.”

“Ah, well, you see...”

“Who in the world would marry someone like you...?” She didn’t listen to anything I had to say and quickly stalked off.

“That was close,” Lucy said. “He almost got another fiancée.”

“Sophie was right. Takatsuki does stuff like that super quick.”

“What’s with you two?” I asked. What exactly were they going on about?

The two high-fived and gave a cheer, though even Prince Leonardo looked unhappy.

Is it because I didn’t properly turn her down since I’m marrying his sister? Was I in the wrong? No, I wasn’t trying to get more fiancées...

After all that, we ate dinner and retired to our tents. The prince and I were sharing one, and I couldn’t really sleep since he was holding on to me.

We continued flying through the sky the next day, and eventually, we arrived at a small settlement. At a glance, it just looked like more of the same thickly growing trees that made up the rest of the forest. However, I could see thatched roofing peeking through the canopy every so often.

This was one of hundreds and hundreds of villages where elves and beastmen lived, and those many villages were collectively referred to as Springrogue—this meant that there was no central town that could be referred to as a capital. Instead, the people of Springrogue formed small communities, living alongside the forest. It also seemed like there was a barrier around the settlement itself that repelled attention, making it hard to actually notice until you were nearby.

The pegasi landed close to our destination and we headed toward the

village's entrance.

"It's been so long!" Lucy exclaimed, rushing toward the settlement.

There was a simple gate blocking the entrance, and someone was on guard duty. That elf looked at Lucy in shock.

"I'm back!" she cheered.

"Lucy?!" the guard replied. "Welcome home! You doing good?"

Those two must know each other. After exchanging greetings with Lucy, the guard looked toward the rest of us. "So, who are these people?" he asked.

"They're my party members—I teamed up with them in Roses. Oh, and also some knights from Highland. We came to see mama."

"Actually...mom hasn't been back for a year," the other elf explained with a slightly awkward look.

Hang on... *Mom?*

But the guy continued talking before I could start unpacking that. "You made friends abroad though! Lucy, you haven't been too pushy, have you?"

"Hey!" Lucy griped. "Just because you're the older brother doesn't mean you can treat me like a kid!"

Say what?! I thought they just knew each other, but they're actually siblings?!

He laughed. "We were worried about you, though. At least you look like you're doing well."

"Yeah." Lucy nodded. "Anyway, see you later."

"Make sure you go see grandpa first!" he called out.

"I know already!" Lucy yelled as she passed him.

"H-Hey, Lucy?" I stammered. "Shouldn't I say hi as well?" If they were family, shouldn't I be properly introducing myself? I hadn't even given my name.

"Hmmm...later. Grandpa's the village chief, so we should talk to him first. Prince Leonardo, Janet, is that okay with you?"

"I do not mind," the prince answered.

“I have no objections,” Janet replied. “After all, he is Johnnie Walker’s son, a hero of Springrogue.”

“Then I’ll show you the way.” With that, Lucy picked up the pace a bit. Since it was an elf village, the people we came across were all elves. I did find something a bit odd, though...

“Oh, you’re back, Lucy,” said an elf as we passed. She looked like a more grown-up version of Lucy.

“Sure am, sis. Is grandpa in?”

“He is, yes. We were all worried about you! You could at least have written.”

“Whatever.”

“Yo, Lucy,” gruffed a burly elf who was swinging a sword. “You brought guests?”

“Yup.”

At one point, a dandy-looking elf came up to Janet. “Oh, you’re a beauty, miss knight. Want me to show you around the village?” In response, Janet leveled him with a glare.

“Hey!” Lucy said in a chastising tone. “You’re supposed to be my big brother, so act like it! She’s a noble from Highland—no hitting on her!”

The next target was Prince Leonardo. An elf wearing even more revealing clothes than Lucy came up to him and said, “What a cutie. Want to come and play with big sister over here?”

“That’s the prince of Roses!” exclaimed Lucy. “No seducing him!”

“Oh! Are you Lucy’s friend?” another elf, who was about Lucy’s age, asked Sasa. “You have an impressive aura.”

“Yes, I’m Lu’s best friend, Aya Sasaki.”

“Oh my! An otherworlder as well, perhaps? I’m her big sister, nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Sasa replied.

A few moments later, another elf struck up a conversation, this time, with

Furiae. "What beauty I behold. What would your name be, my lovely princess?"

"And who are you supposed to be?" Furiae asked.

"Oooh, that cold tone is just as wonderful! Would you like to eat dinner with me tonight?"

"What?"

"No!" Lucy squawked in protest.

Just how many flirts did this village have?!

On another note...

"Say, Sasa?" I asked.

"She already told me," Sasa replied, cutting me off.

Time to switch targets. "Hey, Lucy?"

"Yeah...I know what you want to say..."

Guess I'll ask anyway.

"You have quite a few siblings, don't you?" Pretty much everyone we'd passed had been an older sibling of hers, and we'd already seen about a dozen people. "How many do you have?"

There was a *long* pause.

"I'm the fiftieth," she replied, looking away.

"Uh? Wha?"

"My mother's got a big case of wanderlust, so she ends up getting married on her journeys, along with getting divorced and having kids. Then she brings her children back to the village... Though I guess I'm one of them anyway," she said with a slight laugh.

"I'd heard that the Crimson Witch had many children, but..." Janet murmured.

"Th-That's amazing..." Prince Leonardo sputtered.

Both of them were seriously surprised, so it must have been something that only Lucy's immediate family knew.

“And I thought four brothers was a lot back in my old world,” Sasa remarked.

“I was an only child,” I added, exchanging a glance with her. Lucy’s family was just...on another level.

“Also...” Sasa continued, her expression darkening. “All my siblings in this world died...”

“Sasa...” I didn’t know what else to say to her. Talking about family had obviously brought back some painful memories.

“Aya!” Lucy cried, hugging her. “Makoto and I are with you! We’re your family!”

“Lu... You’re right! We need to make sure it’s a nice family as well!” Sasa replied, returning the hug before turning to look at me. “Takatsuki, I want five children.”

“What?! You want that many?” Lucy asked. “Then I want six!”

Aren’t we getting a bit ahead of ourselves here?

“Everyone...let’s carry on,” the prince said, lightly scolding us.

We all chorused an agreement. This honestly wasn’t the kind of conversation to be having in front of a nine-year-old anyway.

“The big roots you can see over there make up the village chief’s house,” Lucy said, pointing. My eyes followed her finger and I soon spotted a huge wooden mansion.

As I looked on, an elf woman stepped out of the house.

“It’s been a while, Lucy,” she remarked.

“Florna! Yes, it’s been *too* long!”

This must have been another of her sisters. Florna had beautiful silver hair and green eyes, along with a gentle smile.

“I’ll introduce you, Makoto,” Lucy said. “This is our priestess.”

Whoa... Springrogue’s priestess just walked out right in front of us.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Arrives in the Elven Village

“This is my big sister and our priestess, Florna,” Lucy said, introducing the woman more properly. “Florna, these are the heroes of Roses—Makoto and Prince Leonardo.”

“Welcome to Canaan. I’m Florna, the Priestess of Wood,” she replied.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Makoto Takatsuki,” I said, offering my own polite introduction.

“It’s been a while, Lady Florna,” the prince added.

Abruptly, Florna said, “Later, Lucy.”

“Yup, see you,” Lucy replied.

I thought we’d be talking for a little longer, but she’d just up and left. Really? Already? We’d just met, though...

“Lucy, wouldn’t it have been better to...”

“Don’t worry,” Lucy replied. “Everyone will come together since a member of the family’s back. We can talk later.”

“Right. I guess that’s fine.” At least the family connection made things easier. We could accomplish one of our goals right away.

“Come in, everyone!” Lucy exclaimed. “This is where I grew up—the village chief’s home.”

It was a mansion built from weathered wood. The beams that supported the walls and ceiling looked to be made of demon trees that’d been processed with magic. The carpet on the floor was woven in a complex design that had magic characters embroidered into it. Bookshelves covered the walls, and they were filled with books on magic. It felt like I was back in the Water Temple’s library.

So this is where Lucy grew up...

We walked farther inside, and I peered around, taking everything in. I spied a rocking chair in the room, and an elderly elf sitting in it. The wrinkles on his face were deep-set, and his body seemed to be withering away, but his eyes still had a sharp glint in them.

“I have been waiting for you, Hero of Roses,” said the old elf. “I presume that you are Prince Leonardo?”

“No, this is him,” I answered, pulling Prince Leonardo out from where he’d hidden behind me. *Why’d he look at me and think of the prince? Surely I am a blatant commoner?*

There was a long silence.

Uh? What gives?

“Grandpa...don’t try to play it cool when your eyes are that bad.”

“I-Indeed. Lucy, introduce us,” he said.

You should have done that from the start!

“Um, this is Prince Leonardo of Roses. This is Janet of the Pegasus Knights of Highland. This is my best friend Aya, an otherworlder.”

He nodded and hummed along as she introduced us one at a time, but when she said “otherworlder” he gave a jolt. Otherworlders really *were* rare, then.

“This is Fuuri from Cameron,” she continued, using the usual lie.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Furiae added after a moment. She’d gotten a lot friendlier.

“What beauty...”

That was Furiae, all right. Even Lucy’s grandpa had fallen for her.

“Hey! Grandpa...”

His expression snapped back to a serious look, but it was probably already too late.

“Thank you for coming all this way, everyone,” he said. “I am Canaan’s chief, Walt J. Walker. You are welcome here as long as Lucy calls you friends.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Lucy protested. “I haven’t introduced Makoto yet.”

Oh, right. I’d gotten only halfway introduced before being mistaken for the prince.

“Hmm, that would be the youth with such little mana? He doesn’t look like a hero, so I assumed he was probably your porter,” Lucy’s grandpa said with a chuckle.

Hey! I am a hero...more or less... Even if I do have a mana stat of four...

Lucy clutched her hands together behind her back, fidgeting, and she stepped a little closer to me.

“He’s a State-Authorized Hero of Roses, and...my lover, Makoto Takatsuki.”

“What in the world?!” the old elf yelled. I’d assumed that he was in the rocking chair because his legs were bad, but he practically leaped up from it, waving a staff around. “This is the first I’ve heard of that!”

“That’s because I just told you!”

“No! He isn’t right for you!”

“And what’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

Yeah...this seems about right for her family... Their levels of excitement seemed to shift at the slightest thing.

“Grandpa, you shouldn’t be so angry, it’s bad for your blood pressure.” Another elven woman had come out to check on the commotion and calm him down. She also looked related to Lucy.

The chief’s breaths were now coming in wheezing gasps.

“So you’re already pregnant, then?” asked the new woman.

“What?! Where’d that come from?!” Lucy demanded.

Sasa and I stared at each other in shock. Where *had* that come from?

“Well, why else would you bring a man back?”

“I’m not like mama and you lot!”

“Don’t even try it. I bet you’re at it like rabbits.”

“We haven’t yet! W-We’ve only...k-kissed...”

“You’ve only kissed?” asked the other woman tauntingly. “What are you playing at? What’ll become of our reputation?”

While Lucy and her sister were having their...charming...conversation, someone came up next to me. It was Lucy’s grandpa.

“Boy, what is the relationship between you and Lucy?” he demanded with a vice-like grip on my shoulder. I really didn’t like the look in his eyes.

“Uh, well, you see...”

We *were* together, yes, but I was worried that saying so in front of Sasa would end badly. However, at that point, Sasa grabbed hold of my arm and smiled.

“Lu’s his girlfriend. Also, so am I...along with Princess Sophia of Roses.”

“Bwuh?!” came the simultaneous gasp from the chief and Lucy’s sister.

“What in the world...?” her granddad said.

“You got a princess and a man. Not bad, Lucy...” her sister added.

Things were just all over the place now! I ended up having to explain everything rather than holding some of it back. Naturally, I also added our reason for coming to Springrogue—we were here to investigate the origins of the monster stampede.

“A stampede of monsters from the Forest of Fiends...” mused Lucy’s grandfather with a grave expression. “This should be discussed with the other villages. I will prepare the council. Everyone, this way.”

We were guided further into the mansion, into a room that was about fifteen square meters. At the center of the room was a massive magic circle.

What’s this for? I wondered.

Lucy looked at my confused expression and began to explain. “Makoto, this room...”

Springrogue—the country we were in—was the only nation on the continent that had no king. Rather, it was a collection of hundreds of villages of elves and demihumans. So, how had it become organized as a country? According to Lucy,

Springrogue had established a council.

“Representatives of each village come together to make up the Springrogue Council,” she explained. “They deal with the overall running of the country. The chairman rotates between each village on a four-year cycle. Grandpa was chosen back in the past.”

“The system was implemented by the legendary Johnnie Walker,” Prince Leonardo said. Johnnie Walker had been one of Abel the Savior’s companions, as well as Lucy’s great-granddad.

“Great-grandpa was too free-spirited, though, so he was never the chairman,” Lucy added.

“My father spent four hundred years ensuring his lineage as he traveled the world,” the village chief remarked absently. Well, the rumors *did* say that Johnnie Walker had left behind many children.

As the conversation went on, images of various elves and beastmen started appearing above the circle. *I-Is it...a video conference system?* There were twenty to thirty images, and all of them floated in the air. Each one also had sound.

“A summons from Canaan? That’s a rarity.”

“What is it?”

“You’re cutting into time with my grandkids.”

The elderly voices were probably from the chiefs of other villages.

W-Wow! I’d underestimated fantasy worlds! This was a full-on broadcast.

“It would appear that there has been an occurrence in the Forest of Fiends which led to a stampede on a town in Roses. Does anyone have more information?” Lucy’s grandfather asked the rest of the assembly.

“Hmm, I have nothing...”

“Things seem too calm for a stampede.”

“That’s rare for the Forest of Fiends.”

The first few people to speak up didn’t have anything new to add.

“Actually, there have recently been more sightings of the undead,” one remarked.

“Ah...I seem to remember hearing the same thing.”

“My own village has reported seeing undead in the forest.”

But eventually, things shifted in a more promising direction.

“They’re being summoned by the Forest of Fiends, then.”

“This won’t end well.”

“It wouldn’t be an issue if they *stayed* in the Forest of Fiends. But since they’re out in the Great Forest proper, we need to take action.”

The chiefs all wore serious expressions as they started up a debate. I wasn’t quite following the conversation, so I softly asked the question that was on my mind.

“Why is the forest summoning the undead?”

“The grave of Bifrons, the Undead King, is within the Forest of Fiends,” Prince Leonardo told me. “It’s called the Demon Lord’s Grave and it’s protected by tens of thousands of undead.”

“The Demon Lord’s Grave...” I murmured. I recognized the name—it was on the quest board at the Macallan guild, listed as a mythril rank investigation. Naturally, no one had taken it.

Actually...Lucas might have said that he’d tried?

“Why would you just leave something like that?” Sasa murmured. “Couldn’t you just destroy it?”

I was honestly thinking the same thing.

“Well, warrior,” Furiae began, “powerful magic seals it away, but the grave still gives off a strong miasma. Normal people can’t get close to it, and destroying it would require the sacrifice of an incredible number of people.”

While our group was whispering amongst ourselves, the conversation between the chiefs continued.

“Speaking of these things, where is the Hero of Springrogue?”

“Training in the Great Forest for this Northern Front Plan.”

“That was just Highland’s decision. Hardly something we should be involved in...”

“Highland is a large country, though. We don’t have much room for argument.”

The debate had started to include some complaints about Highland, and now Janet had a scowl on her face.

“My apologies for the summoning today,” said Lucy’s grandfather. “Let us reconvene in seven days from now with all the villages. I would appreciate the hero being contacted as well.”

“Understood.”

“Oh, very well then.”

“What a pain.”

Gradually, the images winked out.

I see...so the country unifies its responses like this? It was pretty democratic. I’d heard citizens of Springrogue referred to as just “tree people” that lived alongside nature, so I’d honestly expected them to have a fairly primitive lifestyle... Seeing this, though, maybe Springrogue was the most advanced of them all.

But...

Will this system work during wartime?

Their overall leader changed every four years, after all. I guess it wasn’t our place to criticize how other people ran their countries.

With the meeting concluded, we all filed out of the conference room—next, Canaan held a feast to welcome us.

There was a lot of food, and a *lot* of Lucy’s family. The majority of the cooking utilized wild plants and fruits, grilled horned rabbits, river fish, and so on. The seasoning was light, but everything was done well and it all tasted good.

“Oh, so you’re a prince? How cute.”

“Do you like older women?”

“Hey! You’re over forty years older.”

“You’re not much different. You’ve been and gone twice.”

Prince Leonardo was proving popular with the female elves. Incidentally, they were all fairly old in literal terms but still looked to be in their twenties. On top of that, they were all visions of beauty. That was elves for you...

“M-Makoto...” he pleaded, looking my way for help.

Unfortunately, I was caught up with Lucy’s granddad.

“So, Makoto. Tell me about your relationship with Lucy.”

“Um, well we met in Macallan.”

“Come on, grandpa, this is the tenth time!” Lucy protested.

But the old elf just kept going. “You say you are *with* both Lucy and this Sasaki woman! Surely that must be in bad faith!”

Incidentally, Sasa was currently nestled on my lap. She *said* it was because she was drunk...but I wasn’t so sure she was actually even tipsy.

“Come on, grandpa! Enough already!”

“It is not! You’re too much like Rosalie!”

“No way, not even slightly!”

“Right, she’d already had kids by Lucy’s age,” one of the sisters chimed in.

“So did you!”

“Did I?”

Lucy’s mother... I kind of wanted to meet her once. I also wanted to speak with the priestess, but Furiae was currently doing so. She must have been talking as one priestess to another—I’d have to get Furiae to fill me in later.

The elves were all heavyweights when it came to drinking, and it didn’t look like the party would end any time soon. The prince, however, was dropping off, so I walked him to bed. Janet’s subordinate was keeping watch over him, so I didn’t need to worry.

Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae were all still at the party, so I'd need to head back.

But I am feeling a bit tipsy, so maybe I'll get some air first...

I wandered around the darkened village for a while. It felt kind of empty without any street lighting. There were spots of glowing moongrass all over the place though, and they bathed the area in moonlight.

Night Vision enabled me to see, despite the dim lighting. Considering how good elven eyes were, they must only bother with this much illumination. The barrier around the village kept it safe, and the silver light from the moongrass was gorgeous.

As I was walking through the village and enjoying the night breeze, a female voice called out to me.

"Oh, I haven't met you before."

An elf woman was standing in the moonlight.

Is she one of Lucy's sisters?



Her big blue eyes reminded me of Lucy, though her hair shone gold in the moonlight. She had an aura of refinement that would make you assume she was nobility if she were human. If Lucy were a bit older and calmer, would she look the same?

This woman hadn't been at the party.

"I'm Makoto Takatsuki. I'm an adventurer who's in a party with Lucy."

"Oh my! When'd Lucy get a man?" She grinned, sensing some gossip. "How about we talk for a bit? You're an interesting one." As she spoke, she started tugging me along by the hand.

Sh-She's strong.

Suddenly, my feet lifted from the ground.

Flight magic?

It was a relatively popular mid-rank spell, so there was no shortage of users. Yet, this mage made the floating feel natural, more than any other time I'd experienced it. That was another impressive thing about her. Before I knew it, we'd arrived at the top of the massive tree in the middle of the village. There was a thick branch just big enough for the two of us to sit on.

"This spot has the best scenery in the village," she explained.

"It lets you look out over the forest, yeah."

The Great Forest was lit by the moon overhead. The trees might've been reacting to the mana from the moon since they were also faintly glowing. There was, however, a conspicuously dark spot within the sea of treetops. *Is that the Forest of Fiends?*

"You're interested in the Forest of Fiends?" she asked.

"Yes, we came to investigate it—"

She cut me off. "Hmm, *I'm* more interested in how far you and Lucy have gone." Still holding onto my hand, she used her other hand to ruffle my hair. She was really touchy-feely. Sasa was the same, but this woman certainly was more used to it.

“Well, we’ve gone together into Labyrinthos and the Great Forest,” I said.

“That’s not what I meant by ‘how far...’” She chuckled, still not letting go of me. “You’re...Makoto, right? There’s something strange about you. You have practically no mana of your own, but the elementals love you.”

“You can see them?” I asked.

“Of course. I can see water, wind, ground...but of course, fire elementals are the ones I like the most.”

W-Wow! She’s mastered four elements.

I’d been speaking with Lucy’s family earlier, but none of them could see the elementals.

“Which means you can see them as well?” she asked, suddenly edging closer. I could feel her breath on my cheek.

“Y-Yes... Though, only water elementals...” Well, strictly speaking, I could see the fire elementals when I kissed Lucy, but I kept that quiet.

“Hmm... What a strange human you are, to be so close to the elementals. You certainly are an interesting one.” As she spoke, she planted herself in my lap. She must have been using magic, because I couldn’t feel any weight at all.

“Um, what are you doing?”

“Stay still a moment.”

She was leaning in closer to my face when the silence was broken by someone calling my name from the trees below.

“Makoto! Where’d you go?”

“I can smell him around here...”

Lucy and Sasa must have come to search for me. Did Sasa really have a sense of smell on par with a dog?

“Sorry, I should be heading...huh?”

Before I knew it, the woman was gone. She’d vanished so completely that I almost thought I’d hallucinated her.

What the hell...? Maybe I'd been daydreaming? Not entirely with it, I made my way down from the tree.

"Hey, you two," I greeted.

"Takatsuki! Hm...were you with someone?"

"I can smell a new perfume on you," Lucy said.

"Huh?"

The two of them leaned in close to me, then proceeded to stare.

"N-No! I was just looking at the moon."

"Lies."

"P-Princess?"

Furiae had shown up as well.

"You're lying, my knight! You were with some woman!"

And so the lie was seen through instantly. Fate magic must have let her know that I'd been talking with someone. In the end, I explained about the elf woman, but when we got back to the party, she wasn't there.

"I think it might have been mama," Lucy told me the next day.

"Huh?"

We'd been put up in Lucy's old home and Lucy's sister was making breakfast.

"She had blonde hair and blue eyes, and looked like me, right? Plus, she was good at magic?"

"Yeah," I replied. "She kind of had the same air as you. Also, she had crazy control of her mana." She had certainly looked like an older sister of Lucy's.

"Lucy looks the most like her," the sister interjected, still cooking.

"Damn you, Rosalie. If you're back, you could at least show yourself." I heard the chief complain quietly.

That was Lucy's mom? I should have spoken with her for longer.

Springrogue's strongest fighter was Rosalie J. Walker, also known as the Crimson Witch. She was one of three mages to be considered the strongest on the continent—alongside the White Grandsage and Oz the Northern Miracleworker—and was currently the most powerful mage in Springrogue.

Her fame had been cemented a century ago in the great human-demon war. One of the four demon lords that had ruled the Demon Continent at the time was Valac, King of the Flies. A hundred years ago, he had commanded a force to attack the western continent, and the six heroes of the goddesses had met him in battle.

At the time, Rosalie had been a companion of the hero of Springrogue. The war between the demons and the human-demihuman alliance had been long and drawn out—the demon armies had seemed endless, and the defenders had been gradually dwindling.

Valac had sent his forces forward and stayed on the continent himself. The Grandsage had somehow kept these forces held back, but without reinforcements, they'd lose the war of attrition sooner or later. Rosalie had feared that outcome, so she'd led a counterattack alongside the Hero of Highland. Why Highland rather than Springrogue? Well, the Hero of Springrogue had already been wounded in battle and had withdrawn from the front lines.

The Crimson Witch had specialized in ultra-long-distance teleportation, and she could take two people in total—including herself. Therefore, she'd taken the strongest fighter (Highland's hero) and together, they'd managed to strike the demon lord down.

Having proven herself a hero, she'd married the Hero of Highland and they'd all lived happily ever after.

It'd been a picture-perfect fairytale ending. However, the Crimson Witch hadn't been able to function under the strict class divides in Highland, and the marriage had broken down within five years. Apparently, she'd then returned to Springrogue before starting to travel the world, sticking her nose into anything that seemed interesting.

Her specialization now was elemental magic. None could match her with fire

and wind elementals—she would use them to create massive giants of fire and leave only ashes in her wake. Because of that, she had gradually become known and feared as the Crimson Witch.

That was the tale of Rosalie the Crimson Witch, as told by Lucy over breakfast.

“Hey, Aya, Fuuri, I’ll introduce you to my friends around the village!” Lucy exclaimed after we finished eating.

“Sure.”

“I don’t have anything else to do.”

So, the three girls headed out into the village. Lucy hadn’t been home in a while, so I figured we should let her do her own thing.

I’d wanted to talk to the Priestess of Wood some more but couldn’t find her. Maybe she was working. The Hero of Springrogue was training, so I couldn’t talk with them either.

Guess I have some free time. Maybe I could check out the Wayward Woods?

I’d been to that dungeon with Lucy once before. Unlike the Forest of Fiends, it was suitable for iron rank adventurers, just as long as you didn’t lose your way.

I should be fine on my own.

As I was leaving, Prince Leonardo came up to me. “Where are you going, Makoto?”

“I want to take a look around the Wayward Woods.”

“You’re going to a dungeon alone?” he asked worriedly. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“I’ll run away if it looks dicey. It’ll be fine.”

“Well then...I’ll come too!”

Oh, he’s gonna give me some backup?

“Wait,” Janet interrupted. “If Prince Leonardo is going, then so shall I. Princess Sophia entrusted me with her brother’s safety.”

“She did?” It was the first I’d heard of it. I’d thought that the Pegasus Knights would be heading back since we’d arrived in Canaan.

“She also asked me to look after you.” Janet’s gaze turned cold as she stared at me. Apparently, my reputation as a womanizing hero had been solidified...even though I was still a virgin.

“Nrow, nrow,” Twi mewed, jumping up on my shoulder.

“Weren’t you with Furiae?” I asked, rubbing the cat’s throat and prompting it to purr. Janet stared fixedly at Twi.

“Want to touch Twi?” I asked.

“I-I do not!” Janet shouted with a glare. She sure *looked* like she did... Regardless, the three of us (plus one cat) headed for the Wayward Woods.

The Wayward Woods was a dungeon within the Great Forest. Its main characteristics were being a sea of unchanging trees with shoulder-high weeds. The thick mist kept it gloomy even during midday when the sun was high, and elementals were said to enjoy leading travelers astray. It was, to sum it up, easy to get lost.

“Yup, we definitely need *Mapping*,” I said as we walked.

The guild considered it to be a dangerous dungeon, but less because of the monsters and more because of how easy it was to lose your sense of direction.

“Your *Mapping* skill seems well developed,” Janet remarked.

“The woods are even less pleasant than I thought,” added the prince.

We kept talking as we traveled through the woods. Fortunately, we hadn’t come across any dangerous monsters so far. After a while, though, we stumbled across something bizarre.

“What happened here?” Prince Leonardo murmured, sounding frightened.

“Be careful, Your Highness. There could be dangerous monsters around.” Janet lifted her spear, ready to protect him.

“They’re corpses...” I mumbled. “Not just animals either—there are monsters too.” The bodies were scattered around the trees. Deer, horned rabbits, and so

on. At a glance, it looked like a person had killed them.

Were they...eaten?

The animals all had bite wounds. However, there seemed to be very little blood for the injuries they'd sustained. I didn't really want to stare, but looking closer, I saw that the bodies were all dried out.

"Makoto Takatsuki. You are familiar with this dungeon, correct? What kind of monster did this?" Janet asked.

"The monsters in the Wayward Woods are the same as in the rest of the forest. I've never seen something that would do this."

Honestly, this was the first time I'd seen anything like this, anywhere.

"Makoto...have they been drained of blood?" asked Prince Leonardo.

"Looks that way." Drained of blood... So, a vampire? At this time of day? Weren't the undead active at night?

"Well, we heard during the conference that there *are* more undead around," the prince pointed out.

"The Demon Lord's Grave... The undead gather around that area, right?" I asked. Lucy's granddad had mentioned something like that.

"Bifrons... The Undead King who was sealed over a thousand years ago but still produces miasma..." whispered the prince.

"The seal hasn't been broken, has it?" The idea of a sealed grave gave me a bad feeling.

"That seal was created by Abel the Savior and the Grandsage, so it'll never break!" Prince Leonardo exclaimed.

"Hmm..." Well, I guess I'd just have to believe in that.

"You are prone to worry, Makoto Takatsuki," Janet said. "It would take Shur or Setekh to break the seal, and Abel the Savior defeated both of them. Undead are the worst type of demon, so Highland would never set up paltry measures to counteract them."

Janet seemed to find the idea laughable as well. Maybe it was just me fretting

too much since I wasn't from this world...

But...

That was when we heard it.

It was a strange noise, like a crunching, slurping sound. It reminded me a bit of a carnivore eating its prey. What was that sucking noise, though? I'd never heard anything like it before.

We all exchanged looks and naturally fell silent, walking as quietly as possible.

"Should we go back?" I whispered. Escape was always a good option when you found an unknown enemy.

"No," Janet argued. "I want to know what made that mound of corpses. We need to at least see it." There was a certain amount of logic to her reasoning.

I turned to Prince Leonardo. "Hold on to me tightly so *Stealth* stays active on you."

"R-Right!" The prince was already nervous, and he tightened his grip on my arm.

"U-Um...I cannot use that skill either," Janet admitted in embarrassment.

Stealth definitely didn't fit the image of a Ballantine knight, so I wasn't exactly surprised.

"Then you hold on to me too."

She gently grabbed the sleeve of my other arm. We carried on, soon drawing close to the source of the sound. There were more and more corpses littered at our feet, and the smell of blood was strong in the air.

"It's a feeding frenzy..." Janet murmured. Prince Leonardo had paled even further.

Our breath had caught in our throats at the sight.

The forest floor had been dyed bright red, with over a hundred monster corpses lining the area. They had all been bitten, without exception. Standing in the middle of them, munching and slurping, was...a humanoid. We watched it for a while.

Suddenly, the thing turned our way. Its face was eyeless, with just black holes where eyes should have been. Its pale white skin was cracked and pulsing with dark blood. Just looking at it, I knew that this thing was a blight on existence.

The teeth in its maw were sharp like a shark's, with rivulets of blood running down them as evidence of its earlier activities.

Is that...a vampire?

It seemed ridiculous to compare that abomination to the Grandsage—the whole thing was blasphemy.

Beside me, the prince was shaking, and he let out a small whimper. Janet had a sheen of sweat on her forehead. The vampire grinned in our direction, opening its mouth. Janet and I readied our weapons.

"My apologies, I was focused on my meal. Oh, how embarrassing," it said, scratching its head with a clear laugh.

H-Huh...?

The shockingly friendly response made me stall.

"Elves... No, you don't feel like elves. Oh, you humans are in the forest?" It chuckled once more. "I can't see you, but then again, I've got no eyes!"

While its tone of voice was cheery, overall, the thing just seemed crazed. Was it an enemy? The other two couldn't seem to manage a word.

Since I was calm, I'd have to talk with it.

"Likewise, we apologize for interrupting your meal," I said.

Its face morphed into an expression of surprise. "My, how polite. To think that someone would speak normally with me... I never would have thought so a thousand years ago. My, how times change."

"A thousand years ago?" I asked.

"Well, I only just woke up from a long sleep. That's why I'm so, so hungry. Though honestly, it shames me to eat such base food."

A thousand year...sleep? Could it be?

"Are you Demon Lord Bifrons?" I asked, a slight quake to my voice.

It started laughing uproariously. “Me?! The Great Bifrons?! Humans have gotten even more amusing over the last millennium! No, I am merely a nameless demon. It is an honor to be compared to him, human.”

“Ah.” So he wasn’t a demon lord. Thank goodness. I was still the only one talking—the others were speechless. Twi hissed on my shoulder, fur standing on end.

Time for a strategic retreat, I think. That was when words appeared in front of me.

Will you run from Demon Lord Bifrons’s subordinate, Setekh?

► Yes

No

Come on...seriously?

A demon lord’s subordinate was standing right in front of me. *Didn’t Abel the Savior take this guy down?! We need to run!*

It hadn’t even taken me a second to make the decision. This wasn’t someone I could fight. Even *RPG Player* was asking to run.

“Well then...I’ve got an appointment to keep, so I’ll leave you to it,” I said, maintaining a calm front as I bid the demon farewell.

“Oh. Is that so, human? I’d hoped to talk for a while longer. A shame.”

The demon didn’t *look* particularly torn up about it, and he didn’t stop us. Phew. I tugged at Prince Leonardo’s hand and clapped my other hand on Janet’s shoulder. The two of them stood rooted to the spot, shuddering. *Hmm...maybe I should pull them?* But Janet’s armor looked pretty heavy, so I probably couldn’t manage it on my own.

Suddenly, there was a keening howl—a shadow passed over our heads and attacked the vampire.

A Wolf King from the Great Forest? That shadow was indeed the leader of the

forest wolves. It must have come for revenge after the demon killed its pack.

“My, what a bouncy puppy,” the vampire remarked, laughing joyously, heedless of the wolf’s jaws around his throat. Then, fixing his arms around the wolf’s neck, the vampire leaned in and used his own teeth to tear a chunk of flesh from around an artery. The Wolf King scrabbled at the ground as gushing blood showered the area. However, the vampire’s arms held fast, and the wolf breathed its last in the hold. Then, with a grotesque slurping sound, the vampire started draining the wolf of its blood like one might down a sports drink.

The Grandsage definitely has better table manners. If she’d drained me like that, I would’ve been a mummy in a moment.

The vampire seemed focused on its meal, and I would’ve loved to get away in the middle of it, but...

“Phew, fresh is definitely best for blood. Monsters of late have been dying all too quickly. I thought this puppy might have lasted a little longer.”

The drained carcass fell to the floor with a thud.

It’s already done...?

Now that the wolf was out of the way, the vampire’s entire body was stained red. His eyes were still empty hollows, but it seemed like his skin had been slightly rejuvenated. Was he regaining power? While I was thinking over the implications, Setekh the vampire sniffed at the air.

“Oh my. I may not be able to see you, but it smells like none of your blood is yet tainted.”

“Tainted blood?” I asked after a pause.

There were two meanings to that phrase. One implied that there were no demons in a person’s ancestry. The other, when used by a vampire, meant that a person had not yet had any “experience” with the opposite sex.

So essentially, he’s saying we’re all virgins.

I’d really prefer if people stopped prying into my privacy like that!

The prince was a child, so that went without saying, but I couldn’t help but

mentally note that Janet was “untainted” as well. I glanced at her. Considering her current, pallid complexion, it really wasn’t the time to poke fun.

“Oh! How long has it been since I have drunk fresh human blood?! It must be delicious!”

Setekh’s hands shot open and his mouth split into a grin. Then, his body split as well—all the markings that had looked like cracks in his skin opened wide, revealing mouths.

He’s covered in mouths?! Gross!

It reminded me of the blight dragon in Labyrinthos. The hundreds of mouths started to cackle, and the various laughs formed a discordant symphony. Hearing the horrendous sound, I decided that I didn’t want to stick around. Quickly, I yanked at the prince and Janet.

“Ahhhhhhh!” the prince yelled. Suddenly, he leaped at the vampire.

“P-Prince?!”

“Prince Leonardo!”

Janet and I instantly raced after him.

“Blizzard Blade!”

His sword closed in.

“Oh, the food is coming to me,” Setekh remarked. He caught the prince’s blade, holding it back with two fingers. Fangs shone red with blood from the demon’s wide mouth.

I need to protect the prince!

Janet moved first, though.

Thunder Lance! She wrapped herself in aura and rocketed forward.

There’s no way that attack’s dodgeable!

“My, how sparky,” the demon said. He used his other hand to catch Janet’s spear. “This power feels akin to the Hero of Lightning from a thousand years ago. Perhaps you’re related?”

He's way too strong!

The vampire paused for a moment. "I suppose it is my turn."

Makoto! Cover your ears!

As soon as I heard Noah, I hurried to do as she instructed.

Not a moment too soon—a shock wave almost brought me to my knees. It thudded into my stomach as all the birds fled the treetops. Prince Leonardo and Janet collapsed where they were. They still had mana, so they were probably still alive...although...

Shit.

"Elementals," I called, praying they'd respond.

Makoto, the dagger!

I followed Noah's advice again, unsheathing the dagger and funneling the elementals' mana into it.

It began to ring, becoming an ad-hoc mana blade thanks to the elementals. This vampire associate of the demon lord had easily defeated both Prince Leonardo, who was the Hero of Ice and Snow, and Janet, the Hero of Lightning's sister. Plus, considering what he'd said...

If he's talking about a hero from a thousand years ago...then he must be old enough to have fought Abel the Savior.

A cold sweat sprang up on my back. My elemental magic was great for wiping out a bunch of small fry at once, but I was out of my depth against a single strong opponent. That was why I avoided one-on-one battles, focusing instead on ambush tactics.

I wasn't sure what I should do...so I just set *Calm Mind* to maximum and kept pumping mana into the blade. However, the vampire did nothing. He just stood there.

"That elemental mana..." he murmured eventually. "The pressure of that godslaying blade... It cannot be." His voice had changed, shifting to shock. His lack of eyes made reading any expression on his face pretty difficult. Suddenly, he gave a polite bow. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Setekh the vampire. I

follow the Great Iblis and the Daemon Typhon.”

I...wasn't sure how to react. What had brought this on?

“Could you tell me the name of the god you follow?” he asked. I wasn't sure how to answer. Noah was usually treated as a wicked deity. Then again, the creature asking *was* a demon, so...

“The goddess Noah...” I answered. The shift in his behavior was dramatic.

“Oh, what fortune! A disciple of one of the old gods that helped us so much! To think, I'd meet a comrade here!”

“Uh...ummm?” What the hell?

Makoto, humor him. You can't beat him now.

I let out a mental sigh. “You know her disciples?” I asked him.

“But of course! He was a true hero! He slaughtered the pretenders to the title, people following the foul Sacred Deities! Simply recalling him sends me all aflutter!”

My predecessor apparently had rave reviews. Then again, it made sense from a demon's perspective.

“So, we will soon start preparing for Lord Bifrons's resurrection with the archbishop. Would you care to join us?”

I let out a mental yelp. I'd never expected to be asked that. At least now I knew what the plan was, though.

“Um, would that archbishop be the cambion Isaac?” I asked.

“Indeed, my comrade! I see you are already acquainted!”

“Ah, well, a bit.” *As enemies...* Still, it was him again...

“Cambions were pitiful a thousand years ago, but this one awoke me from my slumber, so they've grown much more useful,” Setekh told me happily. This vampire sure liked the sound of his own voice.

“Incidentally, how are...*we* resurrecting Lord Bifrons?” That was the most important question. Humanity had to stop it.

The vampire chuckled. "I'd love to tell you, but not even I know the full method. Sir Isaac would be a better person to ask."

"I-I see..."

Damn, he was keeping that information need-to-know. I figured that I shouldn't stick around, so I decided to end the conversation.

"Well, I should be leaving with those two about now," I said, pointing at the two collapsed forms. Upon closer inspection, they were both breathing, and they didn't *look* too hurt.

"Hm, I can pick up the stench of those deities on the pair of them..." the demon spat. "Oh, wait, your dagger possesses the same scent. What is the meaning of this...?"

Guh, was he on to me? I guess there's only one way out of this situation—

"It is all according to Lady Noah's guidance," I told him.

—blame Noah.

Hey!

"I see, I see! Her plans run deep indeed!"

He was a pretty open vampire. I'd love to keep talking, but him finding me out was scarier than the information was tempting. I'd just ask one more question.

"One last thing... When will the demon lord be resurrected?"

"I believe Sir Isaac said the rite would take place on the next full moon."

The next full moon...should be in four or five days. If we'd just taken it easy for the next week, the demon lord would already be back. Damn, that was close.

"I shall continue the hunt to regain my power then," the vampire told me. "May the old gods bless you."

"Indeed...thank you for the information," I replied.

At that, Setekh vanished into mist.

Thanks for the help, Noah.

You were cutting it fine.

I could do without bumping into the demon lord's subordinates on the roadside! Oh, right! I can't just space out here.

"Prince Leonardo! Janet!"

I rushed over, then used potions on both of them. Slowly, they opened their eyes.

"Urg...Makoto?"

"I'm...alive?"

The two of them got up. *Thank goodness... They both seem fine.*

"What happened to that demon?!" Janet demanded, grabbing me. "Don't tell me you killed it?!"

"He was way beyond me. I managed to get him to leave."

I couldn't exactly explain that it was because he was friendly with my predecessor, so I just used Eir's blessing to handwave past that little detail. That wasn't the important information, anyway. The moment I finished explaining the demon lord's revival, the pair paled again.

"That demon...was Setekh, Bifrons's subordinate?"

"The next full moon? This is awful..."

Man, it was all too much.

"Why are you so calm?" Janet demanded, peering at me strangely.

"I'm...not?" I half asked. "I was really nervous until the vampire left."

There was a pregnant pause, then she sighed. "You certainly don't look it."

"We should head back to the village," the prince suggested. "We need to make sure Springrogue knows."

"That's true, and we need to share it with the other countries as well," Janet said. "If possible, my broth—some other hero could come and help us in the next four days."

"Let's hurry then," I urged.

The two nodded and we returned to Canaan without stopping.

Janet and Prince Leonardo were being seen to by a healer while the second emergency meeting in as many days was taking place.

“Indeed! We need every able fighter! Heroes are a given, but we need fighters from every village!” Lucy’s grandfather exclaimed. It sounded like he wanted an allied force involving all of them.

The battle would take place in three days—the day before the resurrection. How many troops would we manage to gather? Janet was using communication magic to report back to Highland and asking that any nearby heroes be sent our way.

“Makoto...you met Bifrons’s subordinate?” Lucy asked, worried. “Are you okay?”

“Things got a bit dicey, but I’m fine.”

Sasa and Furiae were looking concerned as well.

What he said, though...

The demon lord’s resurrection was something that would affect more than just Roses—it would stymie all the countries of the continent. This must’ve been what the Snake Sect was aiming for.

Therefore, we all made our preparations for the battle three days hence.

“It galls me...that all we can do is wait,” Janet complained, practicing with her spear. The lack of help she’d been against the demon was grating on her.

“I couldn’t do anything...” Prince Leonardo said. “My inexperience put the two of you in danger.”

“Well, a demon lord’s subordinate showed up out of nowhere. That would shock anybody,” I replied, encouraging the prince to not let it bother him.

“By the way, what’s the meaning of those clothes?” he asked.

I wasn’t wearing my usual traveling gear. These garments were shabby and

worn.

Sasa walked up, wearing clothes in a similar state of repair. "I'm ready, Takatsuki."

"Ah, Sasa. Got it. Let's go."

"Where are you two going?" Janet asked.

"The forest is dangerous at night," the prince added.

They'd stopped their practice to pay more attention to us.

"Sasa and I can use *Transformation* to look like undead and scout the Forest of Fiends," I explained. It was getting boring just waiting around, plus it'd be a waste of time.

Prince Leonardo and Janet both looked blankly at me. I just wanted to scout the mission area for information, basically RPG 101, but they were really shocked by my plan.

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Scouts the Forest of Fiends

The Forest of Fiends was a massive dungeon situated in the middle of the Great Forest. The enormous trees and thick mist made it dark, even during the day, and pitch-black at night. The whole place was filled with unpleasant noises and groans.

Sasa and I were using *Stealth* to sneak along. *Transformation* made us look like zombies as well. Sasa had a ribbon on, though, so she was going for a cute zombie. That was...something.

The recommended rank for adventurers challenging the Forest of Fiends was silver. However, most adventurers didn't come here even if they *were* that rank, because...

"Takatsuki!" Sasa whisper-shouted. "That's a zombie dragon, right?"

"Yup. Looks like it's sleeping...I think. Let's avoid it."

We gave the massive dragon of bones a wide berth. It shouldn't have been breathing, but the rise and fall might have been a leftover habit from life? Zombie dragons were classed as calamities. Even a group of silver-ranked adventurers wouldn't be enough to defeat it.

We took a large detour as we headed deeper.

"There're a lot of skeletons," Sasa commented after a while.

"Are they...fighting?"

There were about a dozen skeletons engaged in combat, fighting with rusted swords and spears. It looked less like an actual *fight* and more like playing with siblings. Incidentally, an iron rank adventurer was strong enough to defeat skeletons. They weren't that dangerous.

"What's that big bird drinking from the lake?" Sasa asked, pointing.

"It's...kinda cute."

“That’s a cockatrice. That lake’s poisonous, so don’t get too close.”

“What? The lake’s poisonous?!”

The massive bird monster had a snake’s tail, and it crowed as it splashed around in the water. It was cute from a distance, but a cockatrice was an extremely dangerous monster—its breath could petrify you.

It was, of course, a calamity.

The monsters here are way too varied in strength...

The Forest of Fiends was one of the least popular dungeons on the continent. It was also in first place for the number of adventurers that went missing inside its borders. A large part of that was people not noticing the transition between the Great Forest, the Wayward Woods, and the Forest of Fiends.

On top of that, adventurers who died here would all get turned into the undead thanks to the miasma from the Demon Lord’s Grave! Man...

I’d heard a lot of rumors lately they were planning on raising the rank requirements for this dungeon to gold. *If that resurrection happens it’s gonna need to be more than that...*

“Takatsuki, look, look! There are so many monsters over there!”

“Huh, they’re sunbathing...well, it’s nighttime, so moonbathing?” There were more than fifty of them standing and lying around, groaning. Maybe that counted as conversation for them. This was the first time I’d been in the Forest of Fiends, but still, it felt...strangely peaceful?

There were a lot of monsters though—the density here was even higher than in the middle level of Labyrinthos. Though, since we kept *Stealth* up, none of them really noticed us. There was also no real fighting between the different monsters here, like there had been in Labyrinthos. *I guess they don’t squabble over food since they’re all already dead.*

I saw the odd forest wolf or bear, but the further we went, the rarer living monsters became and the more ubiquitous the undead grew. It must have been some form of segregation between monster types. We were heading for the area considered to be the center of the dungeon, the aforementioned grave.

“Takatsuki, there are a lot of strong monsters that way.”

My *Sense Danger* skill was reacting to something in the same direction as Sasa’s pointing finger. I saw another group of monsters.

“Keep your *Stealth* up,” I told her.

“Right, I know.”

We slowly headed in that direction with bated breath. There were vines perfectly placed to hide us, so we peeked in from behind them. A vague clearing allowed moonlight to illuminate the area.

Before us was a legion of monsters.

I spied a massive two-headed lion, a three-headed dog, and a black griffin. There were even man-eating giants from the north that were known to be particularly vicious. So many monsters, types that I’d never seen before—I couldn’t even process all of them.

The strangest thing was that they were all *armed*. I’d never seen monsters that equipped themselves with tools before. The giants had huge swords, while the quadrupeds wore helms and other armor.

Are they...from the demon continent? I wondered.

I’d heard that the monsters from the northern continent were far more intelligent. The strength of the mana I could feel coming off them—especially when coupled with their size—gave an impression they had lived for vast lengths of time.

If they attack Lucy’s village...

I dreaded even imagining it. Unlike Macallan, the elf village had no real walls. Furiae and Prince Leonardo were there too...

What do we do? Head back and evacuate? Lucy’s family lives there, though. We’ll probably have to stay and defend the village.

While those thoughts swirled through my head, someone gripped my hand.

“Sasa?”

“Don’t take this on all by yourself,” she told me with a smile.

“Did I have a weird look?” I asked.

“You looked like you were in pain.”

So that’s what my face had been doing...

“There, there,” she said, rubbing my head. “You’re so serious...”

I felt kind of awkward. Back in junior high, Sasa had always acted this way. Her early birthday coupled with the responsibility she felt for her younger brothers meant that she ended up doting on me the same way.

I hadn’t been happy with it at first, but since I had no siblings of my own—or memories of my parents being like that—I’d started to enjoy her acting like a big sister. She was doing the same now, ruffling my hair. Gradually, I calmed down.

“Let’s head back,” I said.

“Right, we can talk it over with everyone.”

Worrying about it here wouldn’t help anything. We didn’t know what these monsters were here for, but it probably had something to do with the demon lord. If we were going to stop the resurrection, we’d have to deal with them too.

But first, we needed to make sure that Springrogue knew.

The moment we made that decision, a voice called out to us from above. “What are you doing?”

Sasa and I looked up at the same time. Towering above us was an enormous figure.

Wh-When did that happen?!

It definitely hadn’t been there before. Could it move that quickly? Even considering how big it was? Without making a sound? The figure was—to cut to the chase—a huge, jet-black centaur. However, the horse’s legs looked more like an elephant’s, and it had eight of them. The hooves didn’t touch the ground—they just floated in the air.

Maybe that’s why it didn’t make a noise?

“Can you speak, swine?”

Its voice was harsher than before.

It's an upper-class demon... Prince Leonardo had told me that monsters that could speak were demons. On top of that, demons that didn't immediately attack were likely to be high-ranking. Apparently, they took pride in their names and looked down on those that began hostilities before introducing themselves.

“We're undead that live in the forest,” Sasa said nervously.

“So you have some modicum of intelligence. In that case, who do you follow?”

Sasa fell silent. I should probably answer.

“Sir Setekh,” I said, offering the only demon's name I knew. He was a legend in his own right as the demon lord's subordinate, so everyone would know the name. However, the new demon didn't seem happy about my answer—its face creased into a scowl.

“Him? What is he doing, swanning around after he's just been resurrected.”

Setekh was apparently a rather free spirit.

“Tell him this,” continued the centaur. “We're about to get much busier, so this isn't the time for him to play around.”

“R-Right.”

“We will.”

Sasa and I nodded jerkily. Pretending to obey was all we could do.

“Incidentally,” I said, “could we ask your name?” This guy seemed like he'd be pretty famous.

“I am one of Sir Zagan's Ten Fangs, Jvāla.”

Zagan was the name of one of the three demon lords on the demon continent. He was also called the King of Beasts. Another one of the inner circle?! Come on!

Sasa and I knelt. “While we may not have known, I apologize for our rudeness, Sir Jvāla. Are you here to aid in Sir Bifrons's resurrection?” I'd play deferent for

a while to see if I could uncover more information.

“I am here at my lord’s command,” scoffed Jvāla. “The human heroes will interfere with the rite, and I will simply repel them. The young cambion is currently carrying out the rite of resurrection. You should progress no further.”

“Understood, sir!”

We’d gotten a lot of information. The grave was already the site of the rite, and “the young cambion” likely referred to Isaac from the Snake Sect. The same bastard that had resurrected the thousand-year-old vampire, Setekh. He sure was a busy bee.

“We shall take great care.”

“Excuse us.”

With that, Sasa and I bowed and moved away. I could feel Jvāla’s gaze for a while, but it suddenly vanished.

Teleportation? I wondered. That must have been why we didn’t notice. Jvāla had looked like a fighter, but he was apparently an accomplished mage as well, so maybe like a spellsword?

Once we’d gotten far enough away from the army of monsters, Sasa and I let out a massive sigh.

“That was terrifying,” Sasa said.

“Yeah. I’m glad we didn’t get found out.”

The higher-ups in the demon lord’s army might be able to see through *Stealth*, so we couldn’t rely too much on our skills. I’d met two of them in as many days and somehow managed to survive.

I shouldn’t be so careless. Sasa had almost been at risk as well.

Springrogue was waiting for its forces to assemble, and it was with those thoughts in mind that we headed back to the village where Lucy and the others were waiting.

Sasa noticed it first.

“Takatsuki, do you smell something? It smells like...burning.”

“No, not really...”

It was getting close to dawn by the time we got out of the Forest of Fiends and back into the Great Forest. Our investigation had taken several hours. Honestly, the wary tension I’d been feeling had diminished considerably. That’s why it took me longer to notice the change.

“Look over there. Smoke...”

“That’s where Lucy’s village is!” I realized.

As we got closer, it became more obvious—there was no moisture in the air, and the smoke was prickling at our noses.

Canaan was wreathed in flames.

I started to run. “We need to hurry!”

“Takatsuki, grab on!” Sasa yelled, pulling me by the hand as we raced toward the village. Once we’d drawn near, the towering flames were visible.

Damn it! We shouldn’t have been taking our time exploring!

The Great Forest was burning. Despite the trees being hard to set alight, they were engulfed in roaring flames. While we were avoiding the fires on our way to the village, we stumbled across some blackened corpses.

My heart pounded in my chest. Even swallowing the saliva in my mouth sounded loud in my ears.

I moved in closer to look. *Which of the villagers at the party last night got sacrif—*

Hmm...?

In the middle of that thought, I realized something.

“Takatsuki! They’re zombies!” exclaimed Sasa.

I paused for a moment. “Looks like it.”

The charred nature of the bodies had made it hard to tell at first, but now that we were closer, it was possible to identify them. These were a couple of the many undead in the Forest of Fiends.

What had happened? Had they attacked Canaan?

“Let’s go, Sasa!”

“Right!”

We ran farther into the village. When we saw it, we could only let out low murmurs.

It was like a scene out of hell. There were blackened corpses all over the place, and every one of them had originally been a zombie.

I thought standard fire magic didn’t work on the undead? We’d learned in the Water Temple that sun magic was the most effective. Well, I hadn’t exactly listened properly since I couldn’t use either of them...

While I was thinking that over, we arrived at Lucy’s home.

“Makoto! Aya!” yelled the redheaded elf as she ran over.

“Lu!”

“Lucy!”

Sasa and I yelled in unison and the three of us came together in a hug. I was so glad she was safe. I could see Furiae, Prince Leonardo, and Janet (with her knights) standing behind Lucy.

It seemed like Lucy’s family and the other elves were all safe.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Bifrons’s subordinate Sciulli attacked with a host of undead.”

“His subordinate?” Setekh was already more than enough.

“How many injured?” I dreaded to think about how many people had died...

“Huh? No one’s really hurt.”

Sasa and I stared blankly back at Lucy’s confused look.

Hold on. No one? With this much fire?!

“But the village is on fire!” I exclaimed. “Plus, Sciulli is a high-rank demon.”

“Ah, well, the fire...”

Lucy glanced awkwardly off to the side. I followed her gaze. Residents of Canaan were all calling out and conversing with one another.

“Everyone, make sure the fire doesn’t spread to the godtree!”

“Got it, gramps!”

“We’re in trouble if the barrier drops!”

“Mama’s fire magic’s not going out any time soon!”

“What about the houses?!”

“Leave them! We can rebuild them with wood magic!”

“Someone should go ask Rosalie to ease back the magic a bit...”

“If anyone can get her to listen, go ahead...”

Oh...?

“So the fire...” I said leadingly.

“Y-Yeah. Mama’s fighting the demon on her own. This is the overspill.”

The village was burning because of something the family had done.

“I knew the rumors,” murmured Prince Leonardo, “but seeing the Crimson Witch’s magic in person shows how far beyond our power she really is. She repelled over five thousand undead on her own...”

“On her own?!” I demanded.

Sasa seemed dumbfounded too. “Five thousand?!”

“I was going to aid as well, but if I’d gotten involved, I would’ve just died...” Janet said, her voice filled with disappointment.

“Over there!” Sasa shouted, pointing. Flying through the air was the massive form of a zombie dragon, and alongside it, a scarlet figure.

Wh-What the hell?

Clairvoyance helped me recognize the scarlet figure as the woman I’d met the other day—Lucy’s mother. Her whole body seemed to be covered in a burning crimson color. Actually, *was* she burning?

“Lucy, that’s your mom, right? She looks kinda...red.”

“That’s...her *Elemental Unity*.”

I’d never heard of that technique before. Was it a unique skill or something?

Using my *Listen* skill, I heard Lucy’s mom call out. “*Elemental Summons, fire and wind!*” Instantly, the air seemed to roil with mana.

Whoa... It’s possible to summon elementals? I couldn’t see the fire or wind elementals, but I could hear the noise of them. They’d probably appeared next to her.

Then, she started glowing an even brighter red, and a massive pillar of fire ballooned out of nowhere. It possessed more than ten times the force of *Fire Storm*, which was an upper-rank spell. The monsters around her burned inside it...along with the houses of the village.

“Ah! My house!” I heard an elf screech. Did his place get caught up in the blast? *That’s a shame...*

Even more monsters gathered around Lucy’s mom. They were all undead, but some of the zombies were formerly wyverns, griffins, and harpies. There were easily more than a thousand foes...but the Crimson Witch just grinned in enjoyment.

Fire Magic: Phoenix Flock!

Dozens of fiery phoenixes filled the sky.

“Aha ha ha! Burn!” I heard Rosalie laugh.

Man, she’s just firing off king rank magic while she laughs! Scary!

“She’s like Lu,” Sasa commented.

“Yeah, they both get excited when they cast magic.”

“Guys?! I’m not like that, am I?!” Lucy asked with a hurt look. She was, though...at least a little. She just didn’t go *quite* that far.

Before long, the explosions died down.

“Is it over?” I asked.

“Did she beat Bifrons’s subordinate?”

“Why did Sciulli come here in the first place?” Springrogue had hundreds of settlements, but out of all of them, why did they attack the one we were in?

“That’s...probably my fault,” Florna, Freya’s priestess, said apologetically.

“Florna?” Lucy asked.

“Sciulli said she was here to deal with the heroes and priestess.”

“I see,” I replied. Zagan’s Jvāla had been just as wary of the heroes. I suppose heroes and priestesses were considered key targets.

Florna turned to her grandfather-in-law, head bowed. “My apologies, Chief. The village is in this state because of—”

“Listen! The fires aren’t out! Be careful fighting them!” the chief yelled to the people around him. Then, he looked at Florna. “Don’t worry yourself over it, Florna. The demon army will always target priestesses. We’re family—we help each other.”

“Thank you...”

That man was fairly wise, actually. He’d taken time in the middle of his instructions to give Florna comfort.

“Do you think Lucy’s mom will come here?” I asked. I wanted to speak to her again. *And* I wanted her to teach me some elemental magic!

“She certainly should! She needs to deal with all her damned fire! She can’t just set everything ablaze and leave!”

“Come on, grandpa. She fought off the demon at least...” Lucy’s sister soothed the angry chief.

The tension had just started to ease, when suddenly...

A demon woman dropped from the sky.

“Priestess of Freya!” she roared. She was beautiful, with black hair and pure-white skin...though her eyes were bloodred.

“A demon?!”

“That’s Sciulli!”

“Protect Florna!”

We all moved in to shield the priestess.

“Too slow!” Sciulli declared, swinging a scarlet-bladed sword.

She was quicker!

“Florna!” Lucy screamed. We could only watch as the priestess—

“Slow?” a voice said mockingly. “That’d be you, Sciulli.”

“Guwah!”

Suddenly, a burning red elf appeared in front of the demon woman and hoisted her up by the neck. Before I knew what was going on, Sciulli’s sword had fallen to the floor.

“You’re the legendary demon lord’s subordinate, Sciulli? Considering he ruled half the continent...I expected you to be stronger.” Lucy’s mom smiled, tightening her grip.

Allow me to correct myself—Lucy never made that kind of expression. She and her mom weren’t alike at all.

“*D-Darkness Magic: Darkness Cloak.*” Suddenly, the demon’s body was covered in a dark aura.

“Whoops,” Rosalie said, dropping her.

“You bitch...” Sciulli’s beautiful face was twisted in hatred as she glared up at Rosalie. Rotting mana filled the air around the demon, and it was an awful sensation.

Lucy groaned and grabbed my sleeve. So *this* was the miasma that strong demons could produce... It corroded weaker-willed people’s mana.

“Lucy, use *Serenity*.”

“I-I am...”

“Sasa, you good?” I asked.

“I’m...fine. She’s strong, though.” Her voice was tense. My *Sense Danger* was

blaring in my head as well. Sciulli was easily a calamity.

And standing against her was Springrogue's strongest mage, Rosalie J. Walker, the Crimson Witch.

"Aren't you lively?" Rosalie remarked. "Fine, I'll play." She beckoned to the demon, who glared murderously up at her. Black mana made the air almost thick enough to choke on.

The village elves and even Janet's knights had moved back with pale faces. The only ones managing to remain relatively unruffled were Sasa, Furiae, the village chief, and Florna.

"Lucy, Prince Leonardo, get behind Sasa and me." I stood in front of them. It might not have been much, but it was better than nothing.

"Thanks, Makoto," said Lucy.

"I'm sorry," the prince apologized.

The demons attacking us were getting closer to the level of demon lords, and it seemed like *Serenity* alone was no longer enough to keep calm against their miasma. *This might be an issue.*

While that was happening, Sciulli and Rosalie faced off against one another, surrounded in black and red respectively. You could cut the tension with a knife—a battle to the death was moments away...

"Die!" the demon yelled, instantly closing the distance between herself and the Crimson Witch. A slash burst from her hand, shaped like a massive claw, and...

Rosalie just took it head-on?!

"Mama?!" Lucy yelled. However, Rosalie didn't fall—she just staggered a bit.

"Hmm... That almost hurt," taunted the Crimson Witch. "I suppose it's my turn now."

"What?"

Before Sciulli could manage to say anything else, there was a massive crash—almost like the sound of a traffic accident from my old world—and Rosalie's

red-clad fist impacted the demon.

The instant the punch connected, a shock wave burst forth and swallowed up the pitiful demon.

Those of us watching could only stare, agape. *A single punch...* And the place Sciulli's body had flown off to was still burning merrily.

"All right, done," Rosalie said, waving her hand.

"I see that your monstrous magic is the same as ever," the chief said.

"Dad, you're so mean! You shouldn't call your daughter a monster."

"Mother! You burned too much of the village!"

"Ah, my bad, my bad. Florna's here though, so it's not like it's an issue."

"It's been a while," Florna replied. "Leave the repairs to me."

"Idiot! Florna is our priestess! We can't make her do such things!"

Things had morphed into a bit of a family argument...even as the village burned around us. The elves *were* gradually getting the fires under control, though, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

That's when it happened.

"Fool! You let your guard down!"

A black mass came rocketing in and struck Rosalie.

Lucy, the village chief, and some other villagers all called out for Rosalie. Sciulli was gripping the hilt of a red blade that was currently sticking out of the Crimson Witch's chest. Rosalie looked slightly surprised as she sank slowly to the ground.

"Hmph. That was a rather impressive spell, but perhaps you forgot—I am undead," Sciulli boasted. Rosalie was on the ground while the red-eyed, black-haired demon with snow-white skin stood unharmed, albeit in somewhat shredded clothes.

"That deals with our annoyance. Time to end the priestess." Sciulli pivoted to face Florna.

“I won’t let you!”

“Everyone, protect Florna!”

The warriors, Janet, and the prince all drew shaking swords as they stood in the demon woman’s way.

“Well... That one tickled. I suppose it’s my turn again.” Rosalie was suddenly climbing to her feet, a wreath of flames surrounding her. She slipped the demon’s blade from her chest and let it drop to the floor.

Sasa, I, and all the other elves looked on in shock.

“Impossible... Are you undead...?” the demon demanded.

“How rude. These are the *Flames of Rebirth*. Never seen them before?” Rosalie asked, wiping at where she’d been stabbed. There was no sign of a wound there.

“S-Still, fire magic will do nothing against me!” She hadn’t won, so Sciulli readied her sword. However, Rosalie’s easy smile didn’t falter.

“Really? Let’s see about that.” She pointed her hand up to the sky and began to chant almost musically. “*Oh Althena, embodiment of the holy sun. I offer thee my praise, my prayers, and veneration. Give thou thy compassion unto me, and offer holy retribution upon this foolish one.*”

Vast quantities of mana started to coalesce in Rosalie’s hand as dozens of magic circles formed in the air. Her expression was that of an animal about to catch its prey.

“Rosalie?!” the village chief yelled in a panic. The other elves were retreating as well.

Maybe we should follow suit? Just as I was thinking that, she finished the incantation.

Fire Magic (Saint Rank): Nachal.

The spell activated. In the air, a humanoid figure formed, possessing wings on its back—an angel of fire. It was small in comparison to the king rank phoenix. However, the power held within it was far beyond anything of that rank.

The Seventh Angel...?



Lessons in the Water Temple had taught me that saint rank magic were miracles that borrowed the powers of the gods. I suppose that was why, in this instance, Rosalie's magic had formed one of the messengers of the gods, an angel. Saint rank magic would burn through the enemy, regardless of whether it was undead or not.

The demon suddenly seemed to realize that she was outmatched—she fled with a grunt, vanishing instantly.

“Ah! She's gone!” Sasa complained.

She'd gotten away... Rosalie's smile was fierce, though. “I ask that you destroy that demon, Nachal,” she said.

“Understood.”

Th-The spell talked?!

The angel of fire vanished just as quickly. Was it chasing Sciulli?

After a few seconds, there was a tremendous roar. A pillar of fire burst into existence in the distance, spreading out to form a cross.

We heard a scream as well.

That cross shape was the same as Sakurai's Sword of Light, I thought dazedly.

“Did you get her?” Lucy asked.

Almost as if in answer, the burning aura around Rosalie started to fade.

Her red hair gradually returned to its original brilliant blonde color, and the crimson in her eyes morphed back to blue. Standing there without a single wound, she turned her pretty face toward us.

“Piece of cake.” She grinned, her expression just like Lucy's own smiles, and far too innocent for her moniker.

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with the Crimson Witch

The crisis facing Canaan had passed. Lucy's mother—Rosalie J. Walker—had single-handedly defeated the demon Sciulli and her army of five thousand undead. She was called the strongest in Springrogue for a reason.

Isn't she too powerful? I thought.

She was a hero that had once defeated a demon lord... I was starting to think that we'd manage against even Iblis if we had her.

"Hurray for me!" she said on her way over to us.

The apple didn't fall too far from the tree as far as their voices went.

"You utter moron!" the chief said, smacking her head.

"Oww! Why, dad?!" she complained, holding her head.

"I thought you'd died! Don't worry me like that!"

"That's right!"

"I thought my heart was about to stop!"

It had been a real shock when she'd been stabbed. It must have been even more so for her actual family.

"I wouldn't die from a piddly little thing like that." Rosalie cackled. The chief and Lucy's siblings all put their hands to their heads.

Considering how old the chief looked, Rosalie seemed almost *too* young. I could barely see them as father and daughter. Honestly, she still just looked like one of Lucy's older sisters.

"Hey, Lucy?" I asked quietly.

"What?"

"How old is your mom?"

“I want to know too!” Sasa added.

“Ah...well. Um, mama uses a rejuvenation thing she found while adventuring, so she doesn’t look her age. She’s actually over two hundred, so don’t fall for her tricks, all right, Makoto?”

“Huh, over two hundred?” I mused. “She doesn’t look like it at all.” *That’d map to about forty to fifty for a human.* It wasn’t on the same level as the Grandsage’s millennium, but it was still a fair number of years.

As I was thinking that, *Sense Danger* began blaring in my head. Sasa and I whipped around.

“Owowow! Mama! I didn’t say anything!”

“Luuuucyyy, I’m pretty sure I said my age was a secret to everyone but family,” Rosalie said as she rubbed her fist into Lucy’s head.

Did Rosalie teleport? Also, that looks painful.

“Makoto’s near enough to family!” Lucy exclaimed.

“Oh? He is?” Rosalie moved her hand to prop against her chin and looked between the two of us. Then, she moved it to Lucy’s stomach. “How many months are you?” she asked.

“Zero!” Lucy yelled angrily.

Why does her family always get so carried away about that?!

“Well, you said he was family. Didn’t you come back because you’re pregnant?”

“I-I’m not!”

“That’s right,” Lucy’s sister added in support. “She’s too earnest, so she came to talk about her marriage.”

“Yup, ‘kids come next,’ she said.”

“Right, right. It won’t be long.”

Nope, they weren’t adding support at all!

“We’re not like that!” Lucy shouted.

There was a look of shock from the chief, Rosalie, and all of Lucy's sisters.

"You really haven't done anything with Lucy?"

"What's wrong with my daughter?! She's cute like me!"

"You're the straight-laced type!"

Lucy's female relatives were waaay too eager about having kids. The chief seemed happier, though. *The hell?*

"Takatsuki, I'm tired. Can we rest now?" Sasa murmured into my ear.

"Ah, sorry, Sasa. We were up all night investigating. You go ahead and rest. I've got stuff I need to do." Honestly, I was tired too, but I needed to report about Zagan's subordinate. That was when Sasa decided to say something dodgy.

"Aww, I wanted to sleep with you, though."

"Sasa?!"

"Aya?!"

Lucy and I yelled in unison while Rosalie and her other daughters looked at us with gleaming eyes.

"What kind of relationship do you have with Lucy's boyfriend?" one of the elves asked. "A three-way one?"

"You mean sleep in *that* way, right?"

Come on, ladies, Sasa and I aren't like—

"It's a physical relationship☆!" Sasa cheered.

"Hey! Sasa?!"

Oh no, the girls were all grinning.

"You're just a playboy!"

Well, there went my positive impression with the chief.

"A-A-A-Aya!" stammered Lucy. "Wait! When?! We said it'd be the three of us together!" I didn't understand why she'd taken it seriously, but she started in on Sasa.

Together? That'd be a real marathon... Also, I hadn't heard about that promise before. *That* was their plan? Where's my veto?

"I'll be waiting in bed then, Takatsuki!" Sasa trilled, leaving the area in chaos as she vanished inside.

"Get back here, Aya!" Lucy yelled, chasing after her.

Wait? You're leaving me on my own?

Everyone's eyes focused on me and I ended up reporting on the Forest of Fiends by myself. The comments from the crowd were a real pain as well! Afterward, I headed to my room and slept like a log.



It was around noon when I woke up. Lucy and Sasa weren't at my side, obviously. We had different rooms. I stepped outside into a wall of noise.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Prince Leonardo turned to me. "Makoto, you're awake?"

"Makoto Takatsuki, we have a guest."

In front of us was a large demihuman warrior surrounded by the villagers.

"The hero of Springrogue always looks so gallant. I want him to hold me..." one of them said.

"He has more aura than before."

"We've got nothing to fear from the demons."

"I, the Hero of Swaying Trees, Maximilian Lagavulin, have arrived."

"Welcome to our small village," the chief said. The hero was a demihuman, a dragonoid, by the looks of it. He stood over two meters tall and was built like a rugby player. On his back, he carried a sword that was bigger than me. His skin was also covered in a thin pattern of scales.

So this is a dragonoid... He looks super strong...

He was ranked fourth out of all the heroes on the continent. Apparently, he'd *just* lost to Gerald in the last tournament. Dragonoids were weak against

lightning.

There was also something the chief had said that I was curious about.

“Lucy, is Canaan a smaller village in Springrogue?” I asked quietly.

“Yup. Why?”

She’d told me about the village’s scale before. There weren’t even a thousand inhabitants, while larger villages apparently had several thousand that lived within them.

“Why are the heroes and priestess all gathered here?” Sasa followed up.

“Ah, well—” Lucy started. Before she could finish, Maximillian interrupted her.

“Oh!” Maximillian grinned and looked at Prince Leonardo and me. “Are you the heroes of Roses?”

“It has been a while, Hero of Swaying Trees,” the prince answered.

“It has indeed, Hero of Ice and Snow. Well met to you too, new Hero of Roses. I am Maximillian, Hero of Swaying Trees.”

“N-Nice to meet you. I’m Makoto Takatsuki,” I answered.

He’d come to meet the heroes of Roses, apparently. Maximillian smiled and offered a hand. He was so tall and slightly intimidating, so I ended up feeling rather shy.

“Makoto, you should be bolder,” Lucy told me.

“You’re both heroes, Takatsuki.”

“R-Right...” That was easier said than done—he looked terrifying.

“It’s been a while, Lucy,” he said. “I’ll have to go and greet Lady Rosalie soon.”

“It’s been too long!” Lucy replied cheerfully.

“You know him?” Sasa asked.

“He was in an older year at school,” she explained.

He looked scary, but turned out to be fine once we started talking. He had an earnest personality and was always training in the holy regions of the forest to

become a better hero. He also patrolled around the various villages. On top of that, he and Lucy had gone to the same school. He'd been the student president, even. A whole different world...and they still had student councils.

After introductions, we spent a while chatting. It turned out that there would be a feast to welcome the man. Though with that said, we'd be fighting to prevent the demon lord's resurrection soon, so it wouldn't be too excessive.

After a while, our conversation naturally turned toward the impending fight against Bifrons. The demons would be able to tell if our troops amassed in force ahead of time, so all of Springrogue's fighters would actually join up on the day itself as we headed toward the Demon Lord's Grave. Would we be able to forge a chain of command that way? Well, Springrogue *had* used this method up until now—they were a country of many small villages with little forceful direction.

Freya's priestess, the two heroes, the chief, and Janet were all talking. Their conversation was mostly about how succeeding in stopping the resurrection would strengthen the alliance between Springrogue and Roses. Janet had then joined to talk about Highland. She was a member of one of their five highest noble families, so there might have been more involved to the alliance than I was aware of. Regardless, I was just a commoner hero, so it was all too much for me. I'd kept an ear on the conversation at first, but all the political talk eventually put me to sleep, so I left.

I fancied taking in some of the night breeze, so I stepped outside. The sky was clear, with the almost-full circle of the moon hanging above us.

It's called...waxing gibbous, right?

The moon would be full the day after tomorrow...which meant that, the day after tomorrow, the demon lord Bifrons would be resurrected.

"Elementals," I called, trying to see the ammunition I would be working with on the day of the battle. Water elementals...were in pretty short supply here.

Will it be all right? I wondered. *We're going to be up against some strong enemies.* There was Zagan's Jvāla and Setekh as well. On top of that, Bifrons was on the verge of resurrection.

Honestly, it felt like we'd be better off just leaving it to Lucy's mom, a proven

hero in fighting demons. I was representing Roses both diplomatically and as a hero, though, so I knew I couldn't just shirk my duties.

I started to train, mind not fully on my practice, when someone called out to me.

"Oh, Lucy's boyfriend. You training?"

"I-I am!" I answered, turning to Rosalie. "Good evening."

The woman had just shown up out of nowhere. Her blonde hair was shining in the moonlight. She approached, smiling like a temptress of the night.

"The water elementals like you quite a bit," she commented.

"That's right. You can see them."

Her hand touched my cheek. She wasn't as warm as Lucy, just a normal body temperature. The sensation was soft, though, and set my heart racing.

"Even among the elves, there are few that can use elemental magic nowadays. It's boring."

"Well, no humans use it," I said with a reluctant smile. That's what made learning it so difficult.

She chuckled.

"Right, the church doesn't like it."

She snapped her fingers, causing a spark of flame.

"What was that?" I asked.

"You couldn't see the fire elemental?" she retorted.

"I'm a water specialist..."

"What an interesting one you are. Did you specialize in the weakest on purpose?" She giggled.

Sorry, they're the only ones I can see. Though, if I kiss your daughter, I can see fire elementals too.

Not that I could say that to her mother...

"The day after tomorrow will be the full moon," she stated.

“Right. The day the demon lord returns.” It was more than I’d ever expected. What *made* a demon lord? Rosalie didn’t seem to be bothered at all, though. I’d honestly expected a little more concern.

“That ‘high-rank’ demon Sciulli was such a letdown. I hope that one from Zagan and Setekh will have a little more bite.”

I had no response to that. Well, Rosalie was a battle maniac, so I guess she wouldn’t be worried.

“That Setekh has the legendary *Eyes of Petrification*, though,” Rosalie continued. “I’m impressed you came back safe.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know? It’s pretty famous.”

I hadn’t really heard of it, no... I vaguely recalled hearing something about *Petrification* being one of the strongest magic eyes. The demon had such a powerful ability? But, hang on...

“Setekh had no eyes, though,” I said. Where his eyes should’ve been, I’d seen only black hollows.

“Hmm...so they haven’t come back. What a shame.”

“He said he was regaining his power,” I told her. I guess that’s why he’d been sacrificing the forest wolves.

“I’ll look forward to it then.” The Crimson Witch smiled widely. Honestly, I couldn’t think of anything more heartening.

If he’s got eyes again, I’ll run right away, I swore to myself.

“That reminds me. You’re an otherworlder, aren’t you?” she asked, changing the topic.

“I am.” Her face—so similar to Lucy’s—looked at me with interest.

“Does your world have a moon?”

“Of course.” The topic had changed again...? Where was she going with this?

“Did you know?” she asked, looking meaningfully at me. “There are many worlds, but only one moon.”

“Huh...” So, did she mean that the moon in my old world and this moon were one and the same? That was kinda romantic.

I doubt it, though. After all, in my world, people had landed on the moon.

“Oh, you don’t believe me. It’s true, you know. Every time I’ve gone to other worlds, it’s via the moon.”

“Wha?” She’d been to other worlds?

I then asked exactly that.

“Of course. Lucy’s father is an otherworlder demon.”

The hell? So Lucy was half otherworlder? That was a bit much.

“So you can go to the world we’re from?” I asked.

“I can *go*. Your world has no mana, though, does it?”

“People can’t use magic, no.”

“Then I wouldn’t be able to come *back*. That’d be a shame. I can’t go, but I could send you back, probably.”

S-Seriously?

This was a complete shock.

“Makoto! You’re going back?!” Lucy demanded suddenly. Apparently, she’d been listening.

“Are you?” Sasa added.

“I’m not,” I told them both with a strained smile.

“Ah, here come your girlfriends,” Rosalie chirped. “I’ll leave you younglings to enjoy yourselves.”

“Ah! Wait!” I called, but she’d already teleported away. I wanted her to teach me one of those elemental magic techniques... I’d have to find her later.

“Hey, Makoto, what were you talking about?” Lucy asked.

“You can’t fall for Lucy’s mom.”

“I won’t!”

What kind of guy did they think I was?!

The three of us spent a while chatting before they got too tired and decided to head to sleep. I stayed around to train my elemental magic, thinking hard as I did.

You can go through the moon to other worlds...

It was an interesting thing to learn. The moon here was special. People hated moon magic, so the temple hadn't taught me anything about it. There was still so much to learn here.

I'll ask our own priestess about it at some point, I decided. After that, I focused on training alone for a while.

Eventually, a small figure made its way to my feet.

"Nrow, nrow."

"Hm? Twi?"

My so-called familiar, Twi, was winding between my legs. I thought she'd been focused on the massive fish they'd given her.

If Twi's here, then...

"So, my knight. How goes your training?" asked Furiae, her beauty melding perfectly with the moonlight.

"It's going, Princess," I answered, still looking away.

"You're my guardian knight. You should protect me some."

"What?" Well...I *had* heard some of Lucy's brothers hitting on her. I mean, she was good-looking, so it was bound to happen!

"Why you..." grumbled Furiae.

"Next time!" I promised hurriedly. Whoops, I'd annoyed her.

We kept talking, but then, out of nowhere, I felt a chill run down my back. *Sense Danger* blared in my head.

Suddenly, a dark figure leaped out and attacked us.

The second feast in a row at the mage's home was to welcome the hero Maximillian.

These countries all love the noise, I thought.

I'd been born and raised in (the ruins of) Laphroaig. It was always quiet and everyone spent their days struggling and wearing dark expressions. This clamor was a fresh experience for me—I wasn't used to it, but I didn't hate it either.

"Pretty miss, perhaps we could stargaze together?"

"This is a hundred-year-old wine, perfect for a woman such as yourself."

"Wanna come out with little miss me? I'll make sure you enjoy yourself."

All the flirting was getting annoying, though. Men and women alike would often fall for me and hit on me.

My status as the Priestess of the Moon meant that everyone I met ended up charmed. The mage's siblings were all proactive with romance as well. No one tried to force things, but I wanted to be alone.

After a while, I left the feast and struck out on my own.

"Nrow, nrow," the black cat Twi mewled.

I'm not your master, I thought toward her.

That made me wonder where my knight had gone. I couldn't see him anywhere. As I walked through the quiet village, I could only hear the wind and the humming of insects. Eventually, I came across two others.

"Ah, Fuuri, out for a walk? Make sure to stay inside the barrier."

It was the mage and the warrior. Perhaps the two of them were doing the same.

"Don't worry, I can see it." I was something of a mage myself, after all. Though I possessed no directly offensive magic, I had confidence in my control.

"Takatsuki's training up this way," the warrior said. "Anyway, g'night, Fuu."

The two of them headed back, hand in hand.

"Hey, Lu, let's share a bed tonight," the warrior cooed, talking to the mage.

“Fine. Just don’t strip me while you’re half asleep.”

“But your skin feels so nice.”

“Seriously, quit it.”

The conversation trailed off as they left earshot.

They have a nice friendship. Aren’t they rivals in love, though? And don’t women usually get really catty with each other when they’re after the same man? They just seemed like the best of friends, though. I didn’t want my party to end up awkward so I was on board with that dynamic, but...

When I’d used fate magic to look at their threads, I’d seen a massive tangle. Most of them had been intertwined with Makoto Takatsuki.

You sure are loved...my knight.

Almost scarily so, in fact. They were rather heavy with their feelings—I was always slightly worried he might get stabbed. I still wasn’t sure how much of it he actually realized. My knight always had that lost look on his face.

After a while of walking, I felt the sensation of thick mana beneath my feet.

That mana...

I followed it to its source and came upon a small clearing around the outskirts of the village. My knight was there, sitting in the moonlight and calling for the elementals. Apparently, he was still training. On the portion of his face that was visible, I could see a serious expression.

He’s my guardian knight...

And yet, it felt like I was often being abandoned. It wasn’t like I wanted to be with him constantly. It was just...no one had been willing to be so apart from me before.

“So, my knight...” I began.

I didn’t want to interfere with his practice, but my knight would *keep* training until he couldn’t otherwise. Even when I spoke, he didn’t turn to answer.

At least look at me when you’re talking to me.

The two of us conversed idly for a while, when suddenly...

Hm?

I could sense an enemy.

Suddenly, a dark figure rushed us. It was aiming for...my knight?

"Watch out!" I yelled, diving for him. Black claws cut through the air behind us.

Makoto Takatsuki was prone on the ground, but he soon climbed to his feet. Twi had run into the trees. Clever girl.

"That was close... Thanks, Princess."

"Why is the princess the one saving the knight...?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, thanks to you."

We looked at our attacker.

"Tch, missed." A black-haired, red-eyed demon beauty stood before us. Her body was scorched all over, though.

This was the woman that had called herself Bifrons's subordinate—Sciulli.

"Oh? Didn't Rosalie beat you?" I asked.

"Apparently not."

This was bad. The barrier couldn't stop a high-rank demon. The only two people present were me, a powerless priestess, and my knight, who...wasn't all that strong.

Couldn't Future Sight have warned me about this...? Unfortunately, it wasn't something I controlled. I could only see big events, not influence the visions.

The demon was covered in wafting black miasma as she appraised us. "That irritating witch isn't here now... I'll just eat the two of you to recover."

Ah, right! She was a vampire. A predator, one that would devour us...and my curse was meaningless to the undead. Sciulli approached slowly.

"My knight! We need to run!" I shouted, grabbing Makoto Takatsuki's hand.

"I doubt we can."

"It's no use."

For some reason, their two voices overlapped.

“We’re caught right now,” he said.

“What? When? Ugh, I can’t move.” A small barrier had been erected around us. Our legs were fixed in place too! I looked down to see black shadows wrapped around our lower halves.

“It’s called *Shadow Gaol*,” spat Sciulli. “It was a very useful spell back when we raised humanity like the cattle you are. Food shouldn’t speak, so be silent.” She grinned cruelly as she moved in, her mouth opened wide to reveal sharp fangs. “I’ll drain you dry while you’re still awake...make sure you’re good and scared. It tastes so much better that way!”

A “tch!” made its way from my lips. The battle earlier ought to have damaged her, but she seemed as powerful as ever. A cold sweat ran down my back.

All I had left was...

Closer...closer... Now!

Charm Eye!

I activated my trump card. It was most effective during the full moon, but the amount of moonlight shining down should have been more than enough.

“Pity,” Sciulli remarked indifferently. “That won’t work on me.”

“No...”

“We are the reincarnations of the greats. We exist above you, so what effect would a lower being’s charms have?” she said mockingly. I was done for. “Still, those eyes... Are you the Priestess of the Moon?”

“And what if I am?”

“Hmph. So the whore that once curried demonic favor turns back to the humans. No loyalty.”

“I’m not her!” I yelled. The priestess from a thousand years ago was a different person, damn it!

“It was such an eyesore watching her, a mere human, try to ingratiate herself.” Sciulli raised her hand, and the miasma thickened around it. “Die

where you stand!”

What do I do...?

My knight had just been holding my hand and saying nothing. It was starting to irritate me. However, the demon also wasn't speaking to him—I suppose that, because he lacked sufficient mana, he hadn't captured her interest. Couldn't he do anything?!

“Say, my kn—”

“Pardon, Princess,” he interrupted, suddenly tightening his grip.

“Hey! What are you...it feels weird.”

“It's a *Synchro*.”

The moment he said that, a massive bubble of mana burst around us.

“Wh-What?”

The demon stared at us, puzzled. My expression was probably much the same. I could still only feel the usual weak mana from Makoto Takatsuki, but the swirling mana around us couldn't be missed.

“Ah...so that's where you were, Undyne,” my knight said easily.

Something's there?

I couldn't see it, but it was. If he was to be believed, it was Undyne. The demon was now clearly wary of my knight.

“An elementalist... How annoying. You can both just die.” She was right next to us, black claws reaching for our necks.



Water Magic: Flood Gaol.

Suddenly, we were submerged in water.

Whaaaaat?! A-Air... Wait, I can breathe?

“What in the world...?” Despite the water, I could still hear the demon.

“What is this, my knight?” I asked. I could talk, even underwater. What was going on?

However, my knight ignored both the demon and me, speaking instead to...someone else. “Come on, Undyne. Right, I *did* say I wanted water, but the amount was a shock... Well, it doesn’t look like Lucy’s place is going to flood at least.”

“Damn you!” Enraged, the demon tried to approach, but...

“Impossible!”

She couldn’t move. *Flood Gaol* was stopping her. Makoto Takatsuki was still speaking to someone who was invisible to me.

So surreal...

“That’s just what I’d expect from you,” he said, speaking to the water again. “Not even a high-rank demon can move at all. Well, that *Shadow Gaol* has us in the same boat.”

Then, he laughed.

“What are you laughing at?!” I demanded. Why did he lack any sense of tension at all? Was he stupid? We were going to die!

“Princess?” he asked.

“Don’t look blank like that! Do something!”

“Neither of us can move, though.” After that, he cheerily said that someone would probably come to save us.

The demon’s face twisted again. “Hah! Impressive mana, human mage. Water magic won’t beat me, though! You can’t destroy me—I’m undead! You are our food! Act like it and let me devour you!”

This haughty demon considered herself our ruler. The miasma around us increased. She had even *more* power? Slowly but surely, she was starting to move.

Even while bound in this Flood Gaol?

“My knight!” I panicked, pulling at his arm. “We need to do something!”

“Yeah, getting eaten would certainly put a damper on the day. Let’s do it.”

“Huh?”

He sounded so calm that I almost thought I’d misheard him.

“Hah! Beat me! You wish you could!” the demon declared, confident in her undead nature. My knight didn’t say anything—he just quietly unsheathed his beautifully engraved dagger.

It was coated in mana, and the metal began to shine blue. A blessing to destroy the undead...would be good, but there wasn’t one. This dagger was just a normal magic weapon. Sciulli still wore a fearless smile. My knight held his blade in both hands as if praying.

Then, he whispered. “I offer this to you, Eir.”

What? That wasn’t the goddess he followed. Eir was one of the Sacred Deities.

Suddenly, the dagger began to glow ominously. The water around us morphed into a humanoid shape, glowing as mana compressed into it. Eventually, it formed the shape of a child floating in the air.

No, it wasn’t just the shape—the figure had eyes and a mouth. Its eyes rolled as the naked child laughed. What a bizarre sight, almost as if life had been formed within the water. The child had two small, adorable wings on its back, and it was followed by several more of its ilk.

Young angels...the tenth rank...Angely?

H-How? Only saint rank magic could summon angels. On top of that, it ought to be impossible to summon an angel of a god you didn’t follow.

“Wh-What are you! Stay away!” the demon screamed. She must’ve sensed

that she was in a bad situation.

“*Throw,*” commanded my knight. He launched his dagger, sending it toward the demon.

The blade plunged into her chest.

“What?” Normal weapons shouldn’t have any effect on the undead... In fact, Sciulli started mocking him for exactly that.

“Hah! That puny weapon won’t do anyth—”

Makoto Takatsuki seemed wholly uninterested, just following the motions as he spoke.

Sacrificial Magic: Offering.

As soon as the words left his mouth, the adorable little angels leaped at the demon and began...*eating* her.

She let out a bloodcurdling scream, audible over the sound of something chewing.

“L-Let me...go! Sto...p...”

They wolfed the demon’s body down, even as she screamed and bled black. I could hear nerves snapping and bones breaking. My knight watched it for a time before letting out a quiet murmur and glancing away with a disturbed expression.

Y-You were the one that did that!

I couldn’t even speak in the face of such a sight.

As the Priestess of the Moon, normal things didn’t move me... I controlled death, darkness, and curses. The grimoires and writings for those magics were full of all kinds of gruesome depictions and having studied them, I had developed quite the strong stomach...but I still shuddered at this sight.

“You okay, Princess?” asked my knight, his voice unchanged. I nodded clumsily, confused by how he was so unbothered.

“Thank you, Undyne,” he said. “I’m fine now.” The *Flood Gaol* holding the demon broke apart as my knight offered his thanks. Sciulli was still being eaten

by the angels. I looked closer.

They weren't just eating her flesh.

Her mana...? No...it's like they're eating her very soul...

Defeating the undead usually required holy purification magic...*usually...*

Still, Sciulli's threads of fate were snapping one after another. Those threads were the connections between the soul and the world. Cutting them...meant an end. Her life would finish here.

"He...lp...me...my...ki...ng..."

Her final words were almost unintelligible since she was missing most of her body. That pitiful voice was all that was left of her, and it soon vanished. Then, with a giggle, the angels vanished as well.

Despite her strength, Sciulli's body was now crumbling away into dust. The wind blew away that dust like ash. It swirled through the air and vanished—the onetime subordinate to the demon lord left nothing behind... It was as if she'd never existed in the first place.

All that was left was my knight's dagger, motionless where he had thrown it.

"Well, those wanting to eat should be ready to be eaten..." he said in an almost silly tone. "I'm sure someone's said that before."

I didn't know what he meant—I was too scared. His back was facing me, so I couldn't see his facial expression, and I was honestly scared to find out.

"Phew, we beat her."

His voice was calm. It was the same tone he used to talk to the mage and warrior. When he turned my way, his face was softened by a kind smile—from my perspective, it looked almost demonically innocent.

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Prepares for Battle

“Phew, we beat her.” I sighed in relief.

Sciulli...a high-rank demon and the Undead King’s aide... She had been a horrifying opponent. I’d panicked when she’d attacked out of nowhere. She had seemed weaker than when Lucy’s mom had fought her though, so we’d managed somehow. This was becoming a daily occurrence.

“We got her, Princess,” I repeated.

Thanks to using *Synchro* with Furiae, I’d managed to summon Undyne as well. I needed to thank her for that.

As I turned around to look at Furiae...she squeaked, wearing a terrified look.

Huh? Uh? Why? I thought.

“M-M-M-M...My knight!” she stammered. “What was that spell?! When did you learn something so horrific? And you made an offering to *Eir*?! Which goddess do you even follow?!”

“Wha?” What’d made her ask that? I was well and truly devoted to Noah.

Ah, but the sacrifice was something Eir taught me. Maybe that’s where the misunderstanding came from...?

“Princess, it was—”

“Y-You’re just like that Highland lot—tricking me to take advantage! Just like that demon! Just like her!”

“I’m not.” With a rueful grin, I walked toward her.

“Stay away!” she snapped. “You virgin bastard! You’re after my body!”

“Hey!”

Why’d you say that?! Also, how’d you know?! Was it Lucy?! Sasa?! Well, really, it could’ve been either of them... That was the kind of thing that seemed like it’d come up in girl talk anyway.

“Calm down, Princess. Just...calm down for now,” I soothed, waving my arms placatingly at her.

Gradually, she went back to normal, though she still glared at me silently with half-closed eyes. She was like a stray cat.

“Well, whatever. Hmph! Well done, my knight.”

There we go—back to normal.

“So,” she continued. “About that magic...”

“Ah, well—”

Just as I started to try and explain Eir’s modification of the dagger, a voice interrupted. “Oh, Lucy’s boyfriend. Cheating on her?”

Furiae and I whirled in shock. The Crimson Witch... Had she teleported?

“I sensed some miasma, but it vanished. Do you know anything?”

“Ah, well, Sciulli was actually still alive,” I answered.

“Hrmm! Really? Where’d she go?!”

“We killed her.”

“Oh, you did...?” She looked interested all of a sudden, humming as she inspected me. It felt like I was a mouse sitting in front of a hawk. Suddenly, she touched my cheek. Her hand was kinda warm.

“What a strange boy you are... Lucy seems rather taken, so I’m even more interested.” There was a noise in my ears. *The...elementals, probably?* “How’d you defeat a high-rank demon?”

Her eyes were lit in red, and orange light was spreading through her hair.

Simultaneously, I could smell alcohol. Was she drunk?

“It was thanks to Eir,” I told her.

“Would you mind showing me?” she asked excitedly.

She wanted me to show her...the sacrificial technique?

“Y-You can’t, my knight!” Furiae panicked, moving to stop us.

It was fine, though—I couldn't do it right now anyway.

“Unfortunately, it'll take a bit more time until I'm able to do it again. I just used it, after all.”

“Aww, that's a shame,” Rosalie trilled. Her eyes went back to being blue and her hair was only blonde once again. Then, she looked away from me and toward Furiae. “Oh...you're an interesting one too. Isn't that right, priestess?”

Furiae stiffened.

“Um! Rosalie, the princess here is—”

“Don't worry. The moon priestess is on humanity's side this time, not the demons', right?”

“O-Of course I am!” Furiae exclaimed firmly.

Rosalie smiled at her before giggling. “My Lucy's got such interesting friends. That lamia friend of hers has a strange power about her as well.”

Ah...she knows it all. She probably has Appraisal as well.

“Damn, though. Sciulli managed to slip away? I must be losing my touch...” Rosalie remarked with a stretch. “Oh! Who do you like second best? Lucy's in the lead, *right?*”

“Uh? Um...well...”

This conversation was all over the place.

“Perhaps that beautiful priestess at your side? Maybe that lamia, Aya? Or maybe it's that haughty blonde in the armor or the blue-haired little one?”

That last one there is a boy, Rosalie, I thought.

“I never thought Lucy'd be bringing a boyfriend home. I take my eyes off her for a second and she's grown up so much. Hurry up and give me grandkids!”

I fell silent. The topic had truly been rocketing all over the place.

Yup...she's drunk all right. She was acting just like Mary back home in the Macallan guild.

“Well, see ya,” she said suddenly, apparently having finished what she'd come

for. She hoisted a hand up in the air. At the same time, I started hearing a whooshing noise, and magic circles spread around her.

Then—she was gone.

“A chantless teleportation...even while drunk?”

“She vanished...” Furiae murmured.

The Crimson Witch had arrived, said her piece, then gone.

“Shall we head back?” I asked Furiae.

“Right...we should.”

We made our way to the village chief’s house. Rosalie...wasn’t there. I explained our encounter with Sciulli to the chief and Maximillian.

“What?!” exclaimed the chief. “She was still alive?!”

“It is good to see you safe, Sir Makoto.”

The two of them looked grave.

“Rosalie’s magic had weakened her some,” I explained.

“I should have been with you,” Lucy said.

“Yeah,” added Sasa. “We’re glad you’re safe, though.”

The pair both had worried faces. I felt kind of bad.

“Though, if that saint rank magic could not fully destroy the demon...then we are facing a hard battle,” noted Florna, the Priestess of Wood. She looked uneasy as she brought in some tea.

“Has Freya said anything?” I asked her.

“Just...to be careful... She doesn’t give much guidance like that.”

Hmm, I see.

I turned to Janet. “Can we get any reinforcements from Highland?” If the goddess Freya wasn’t offering help, then the neighbors were our next best bet.

“I have asked for aid, but...something is interfering with the march, so the reinforcements are delayed.” Janet’s voice was harsh.

“Interfering with the march?” I wondered. There were people that would go against Highland?

“It’s the Snake Sect,” Furiae stated, absently biting an apple-like fruit.

“How do you know?” asked Lucy.

“*Fate Magic*,” she answered. “I’ve got an idea at least.”

That was convenient.

“Fuu, you should have told Janet,” Sasa remarked.

“Well...it likely wouldn’t have made any difference. The sect is constantly trying to work against the country.”

“That’s right...” I agreed. They were a damn pain. “I guess we’ll have to rely on Lucy’s mom. After all, she’s Springrogue’s strongest fighter.”

I had no idea where she’d gone, though. I hadn’t seen her anywhere.

“Mama... Well, she drank too much and went off to the moon.”

“To the moon? Not just moongazing?”

“Yeah, she’s constantly using *Teleport* to do it,” Lucy explained.

“W-Wow...” It was that easy? For her, at least, it seemed so.

“I hope she’ll be all right,” one of Lucy’s sisters commented. “Last time she said she was ‘off for a walk,’ she was gone for a year...”

Everyone apart from Rosalie’s family looked toward the elf in shock.

“W-Well, that likely won’t be the case this time. Even *she* should understand the situation we’re in,” the chief said as a trail of sweat trickled down his face.

Everyone was silent. Seriously, what was with this atmosphere? Worrying wouldn’t really help us, so we ended up dispersing to get some sleep and recover our stamina. I collapsed into the guest room bed that the chief had given us. The prince was breathing softly in the next bed over, and I looked toward him.

Yeah, he really does just look like a beautiful girl, I thought. It was no surprise Rosalie had made the mistake.

“Nrow, nrow.”

“Oh, is this where you went?”

Twī had come crawling out from under the bed. I gazed up at the thatched ceiling as I felt the tuft of her tail brush against my cheek. There was a small lamp lit on a pillar.

Tomorrow, we would be heading for the Demon Lord’s Grave, and we still didn’t know the full lineup of enemies waiting for us.

Let’s get some rest... I decided, closing my eyes.



I dreamed that night. It must have been because of the uncertainty in my heart. However, things were different than normal.

“Noah...? What are you doing?” I asked.

The area went on forever, a boundless divine realm. Within this space was my goddess, the topmost “beauty” in the heavens. But...she had a sour look on her face...

And a whip in her hands.

Floating at her side...

“U-Uh...what’s with the getup...?”

Well, floating at her side was Eir. Tied up in midair...in tortoise-shell bondage...

Uh? What?

“Hi, Mako☆” Eir smiled.

Where the hell do I even begin?!



“Uhhh... Noah... Eir...? What are you both doing?”

Eir was tied in ropes and swinging slightly in the air. Noah’s mouth was drawn up in a pout, and she had a whip in her hand.

What in the...?

“Noah’s such a meanie!”

“Don’t try it with me!” Noah shouted. “She tricked us!”

Tricked us?

While Noah yelled, she cracked the whip on Eir. It didn’t seem to hurt her much.

“Oww☆ Violence is wrong, Noah.”

I had *no* clue what was going on.

“Show me my dagger,” Noah said.

“Here...” I said, handing it over with a sigh.

“I knew it... You used it to defeat that demon, right? I thought you used sacrifice magic...but it got caught up in Eir’s trap.”

“Huh?”

I looked at Eir in surprise. She just stuck her tongue out, unworried.

“You caught me,” she giggled.

“You’re shameless! Listen, Makoto—the magic on this dagger offers things to Eir. You risked your life to destroy that demon, but Eir got 99% of her soul and only that last percent went to your lifespan.”

“A 99% commission fee?” I asked. That was...pretty steep.

“She’s making you into her pawn!”

“But he couldn’t have defeated such an ancient undead demon with normal magic, right?” Eir pointed out. “I think you can credit my support for that.”

“99% is still a rip-off, though! Makoto’s *my* disciple! The way you’ve set it up, it’s more like he’s working for you!”

That made sense—Eir had decided to put me to use. I'd had no idea.

"Well, it doesn't matter, does it?" I said.

Both of them let out noises of confusion.

"You don't mind?" Noah asked with a blank look.

I looked at the water goddess before speaking. "Eir's help was what saved Furiae and me."

Her joking face split into a shady-looking grin. "How open-minded, Mako."

"Umm, I appreciate the view, but that getup's a joke."

"Oh?"

Eir was currently bound up in ropes. She usually wore a fairly loose, flowing dress. That dress was currently pulled tight by the ropes, so the curves of her body it usually hid were now obvious. Her shapely chest and taut waist, along with her wide childbearing hips, were all on display.

There wasn't a single fault with her figure. *That's Eir, all right.* It was certainly a pleasant sight.

"Maaakoootooo?" Noah loomed closer.

"Meep! I-I didn't see anything!"

"You did!"

Well, she *was* right in front of me...

"Eir! Get down from there already!" commanded Noah.

"You're the one that tied me up," she countered, slipping from the bindings. Then, she turned to me. "Are you all right leaving things like this, then?"

"I don't mind. Even though it was only one percent of Sciulli's soul, I still got more lifespan, so I'll just keep it up." It cut out the middleman, but I was sure the technique would be useful in the battles to come since it could destroy the undead as well. The only thing was...

The goddesses are all liars, huh?

I sighed.

“That’s so rude, Mako.”

“Wait! I haven’t tricked you!” Noah pleaded.

“You hid being a wicked deity,” I pointed out.

“Gurk.” Noah looked away.

“Also, Eir—I’m sure there are other strong people out there. Do you really have to mess with the one and only disciple Noah has?”

“Right! I’ve only got the one disciple! What’ll you do if something happens to him while he’s fighting the demon lord?!” Noah demanded angrily.

Eir put a finger to her cheek before looking meaningfully at me. “But Mako is Roses’s strongest fighter right now.”

Noah and I looked blankly at her.

“He...is?”

“That’s a joke, right?”

“I’m not lying. After all, Leonardo’s young and doesn’t have much experience. The knights are all specialized in defense rather than offense. Most of the strong fighters are adventurers, so they’re not really *Roses’s* fighters.” Eir sighed in apparent dismay.

“Eir...build up your country’s strength,” Noah told her.

“Do we really not have that much of a pool...?” I asked. Our country’s weakness was being driven home once again.

“I’m the goddess of love and peace! I don’t like those berserkers,” Eir said with a cute pose.

We’re about to fight a war, though...

It felt like she didn’t really realize that.

“That’s why I want you to keep it up, Mako☆!”

“Right...”

She definitely took it easy.

Will you accept Eir's revelation?

► Yes

No

I stared tiredly at the *RPG Player* selection floating in front of me.

"Okay, Eir. I'll prevent the demon lord's resurrection with Springrogue's hero and priestess." We'd probably have Lucy's mom as well. We would pull through.

Noah sighed. "You've got to think these promises through."

Yeah...I did have something I needed to say.

"Eir. The *Sacrificial Magic: Offering* was incredible. The effect...and the visuals as well." I could remember the cute angels devouring the demon woman.

"Right?" she giggled. "It earned you more lifespan, didn't it?"

"Hmm, let's have a look," Noah commented. She was already holding my Soul Book. Well, whatever.

"Oh, fifteen years? You got another ten years."

"That's right. I only had five left after the suicide magic. So that came from the technique Eir taught me, huh? But, how does it work...?" I'd gotten another ten years just by using it once. Building my lifespan up before...well, it had taken *months* of battling just to get a year's worth.

Eir let out a little snort and gave me a sidelong look. "*Sacrificial Magic: Offering* is a miracle that offers the sacrifice's soul to me. The one that carries out the sacrifice gets a one percent kickback. This time, that made up ten years of lifespan," she explained smugly.

"Hmph, how uncivilized," Noah commented, folding her arms.

Oh, so Sciulli's soul got turned into lifespan for me... I'd essentially eaten my enemy's soul. That was pretty sinful. It was basically like something a devil would do, wasn't it?

"Uh-buh-buh, Mako. The corrupted demon soul gets purified and becomes the foundation for a new world. That's a god's love, salvation. Capiche?"

I let out a halting sigh.

Eir really was easygoing.

Before I knew it, she was right up close and had her arms wrapped around my neck. “Know what, Mako? Now you’ve got a technique to get more lifespan—if you convert, you might even get *Water Magic (Saint Rank)*.”

“E-Eir?”

“Moron!” Noah yelled, snapping the whip on her head.

Eir giggled. “Your anima’s sealed, so that isn’t going to work.”

“Grr! Just get away from him!” snapped Noah.

“I’m playing, just playing,” Eir said, moving away.

That’d been a shock.

“Once I get my power back I’m going to kick you over the horizon!”

“Oh, scary, scary,” teased Eir. “I think Althena’s the only one that could win if you get your anima back. I’ll just run away. Far, *far* away.”

“Hmph, she’d lose too!”

Noah sounded confident. There was something more important there, though.

“Noah, you’re one of the stronger goddesses?” I asked.

The two stopped their arguing to look my way.

“Well, yeah,” replied Eir. “Noah’s way older, after all.”

“Still, the seal means I’m the weakest,” Noah added.

So she was a strong goddess to begin with, I thought. I hadn’t expected that. Actually, she might know what I wanted as well.

“Noah, can you teach me the *Elemental Unity* and *Elemental Summons* skills?” These were Lucy’s mom’s special moves. I *really* wanted to learn them. I’d missed my chance to ask Rosalie, but Noah was the best person to ask about the elementals.

“Hmm? You already use the first one,” she said.

“What?” That *definitely* wasn’t the answer I’d been expecting.

“You put the elementals inside my dagger and made a mana blade before, right? That’s *Elemental Unity*. Rosalie just uses her own body for it.”

“Ah, I see.”

Then, if I did the same—

Eir interrupted my train of thought. “Your stats probably aren’t high enough.”

“Eir’s right,” Noah agreed. “You’d probably just break if you tried to imitate her.”

“I...see...” I’d wanted to try it out. Still, when two goddesses tell you not to do something, it was probably better to listen.

“What about the summons, then?” I asked. Being able to summon elementals anywhere would be so helpful.

“Well, she said, ‘*Elemental Summons*’ aloud, but she was really just using *Teleport* to pull elementals to her.”

“*Teleport*?” I asked. That was a pretty high-level skill. “I...can’t do that.” If I could, then I wouldn’t have had all these issues to begin with.

So...that was a dead end as well. A shame. I slumped over.

“Hm?” Eir reached around me, whispering into my ear as she hugged me from behind. “Mako, you want strong skills?”

C-Calm Mind!

“I’m not converting,” I told her after a moment.

“I’m ready and waiting,” she replied.

“Eir!” Noah yelled. She launched a kick right out of *Kamen Rider* at Eir. Her skirt fluttered up, showing her thighs. But...somehow...it didn’t show her underwear? *That* was the miracle here.

“Oh, right. Mako, I need to warn you about using sacrificial magic on the demon lord.”

“Eir, Noah’s still got her foot on your head...” I pointed out. What the hell kind

of sight was this?

“Will the sacrifice work on Bifrons?” Noah asked. She was talking normally while still holding the kicking position.

“Mostly. You can’t use *Throw* like you did this time, though. You’ll need to directly stab him and then activate it. Against a demon lord, anything else won’t work.”

“A direct stab...” So I needed to be within a meter of the Undead King. That was a pretty big ask. “I’ll do what I can, then.”

If I couldn’t manage it, I’d just leave things to Rosalie.

“Take care, Makoto.”

“Good luck, Mako!”

The two goddesses saw me off as I felt my consciousness growing distant.

Watching them like this just makes them look like good friends...

The Titanea and Sacred Deities were supposed to be at odds. Were the goddesses different? As those thoughts went through my head, I gradually lost consciousness.



I awoke in a guest room in the home of Canaan’s chief. I could see the ceiling in the dim light. There was another person in the room.

“Mmm... Makoto... That tickles...” Prince Leonardo murmured in his sleep next to me. *I should probably let him rest some more.*

I washed my face with water magic and threw on a shirt before offering my prayers to Noah. The sky was fairly cloudy. I would’ve preferred rain, but this, at least, was better than a clear sky. There were a fair number of water elementals around.

“Morning, Lucy, Sasa,” I said to the two that had woken before me. They snapped around to face me.

“Takatsuki! It’s awful!”

“Argh! Why is mama so selfish?!”

The two of them were panicking. Actually, it wasn't just the two of them—everyone in the room had grave looks on their faces.

“Ah, Hero of Roses, you're awake. Look at this, if you would...” The chief flashed a sheet of paper at me.

A note...?

On it, a single sentence was scrawled:

I'm gonna go to the Demon Lord's Grave and sort out the demons! —Rosalie

I... Come on, Rosalie.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Faces a Demon Lord

“That stupid girl!” the chief yelled. All of Rosalie’s children (Lucy included) wore troubled expressions. The hero and priestess—that is, Maximillian and Florna—had hard looks on their faces.

Immediately, I suggested chasing after her.

“Wait, Makoto,” Lucy interjected. “*Teleport* is mama’s specialty.”

“We could run after her and not manage to catch up,” Sasa pointed out. “I could even see us arriving at her current location...only to realize that she’s already gotten back home...”

The pair then explained just why everyone was gathered.

“So...all we can do is wait?” I asked.

“I struggle to imagine the Crimson Witch losing...” Janet muttered. This made sense—after all, Janet *had* seen the woman easily take out one of the demon lord’s aides.

“She is not invincible, though,” the chief countered. “Rosalie has said that she cannot beat the White Grandsage.”

“Plus, it was the Hero of Highland who defeated the demon lord Valac a century ago...” added another family member.

Clearly, the family as a whole was concerned for Rosalie. I’d also heard something that bore further questioning.

“The Grandsage is stronger than Rosalie?” I asked.

“Mom said that when they fought in the past...she lost...so, yes,” answered one of Lucy’s sisters.

“What?! Mama fought against the Grandsage?” Lucy exclaimed, shocked at her older sister’s words.

“Apparently, when she was married and living in Highland, she used fighting

as a stress release when the class system got to be too much for her.”

“There were twenty matches between them...and mom ended up beaten to a pulp every time.”

I was amazed at the explanation from Lucy’s sisters, but...

Whoops, getting off-topic.

“So, have we decided our next moves?” I asked, redirecting the conversation back to the current situation.

Silence fell again.

As the country’s priestess, Florna spoke for the whole group. Our plan could be summed up by the following three points: Springrogue’s forces would head for the Demon Lord’s Grave at noon today.

The safest move would be to join them.

The current plan would leave Rosalie alone until that time.

That last point was their main concern. I glanced toward my friends.

Lucy was engrossed in her thoughts, eyes downcast. It had been years since she’d been able to see her mother, so she was probably worried about Rosalie’s safety.

“Let’s set out ahead of the main forces,” I suggested.

“Makoto?” Lucy asked.

“You’re worried about your mom, right?”

“Y-Yeah...” Lucy was fretfully wringing her hands.

“So, we’ll leave before the rest.”

“W-Wait!” said a flustered Prince Leonardo. “You cannot go alone!”

“It’ll be fine. Sasa and I can use *Stealth*, so we’ll avoid the monsters. If Rosalie is there, we can have her use *Teleport* to send us on.” Plus, if we couldn’t find her, we could stay hidden until we met up with everyone else.

“That good with you?” I asked, directing the question at Lucy and Sasa.

“Sure,” Sasa replied lightly.

Thanks, Sasa.

After a moment, Lucy said, “Thank you, Makoto.”

“Wait.” Furiae waved her hand at me. “Aren’t you forgetting someone?”

“You’re holding down the fort with Florna,” I told her. *She should be fairly safe if she sticks with the other priestess.*

“You’re abandoning me again?” Furiae snapped, her eyes narrow and lidded.

“I mean, it’s the Demon Lord’s Grave. That’s not a good...” I trailed off. It was obviously dangerous. However, Furiae didn’t seem to be having any of it.

“I’ll be useful. You know that, right? *Necromancy* is my specialty, so I’m a good match for the monsters in the Forest of Fiends.” She poked me in the cheek, and then I realized that Twi was pawing my leg. *You want in as well?*

Even so...

I hummed. Since I was her guardian knight, I didn’t think I should be taking her to dangerous places.

“Nope. Definitely not.” I decided. “You stay back here.”

“What?!”

“Meow, meow!”

Priestess and cat alike both protested. *So you can meow properly! Still, I don’t care how much you complain—you’re staying here.*

“Right, guys, be ready to go in forty sec—”

The chief cut me off. “Wait, Hero of Roses.” He peered my way with a sharp gaze. “These are needless concerns. Rosalie is our family, so we shall accompany you!”

“We’ll guide you. There are shortcuts known to the elves.”

“We’ll be ready in moments.”

“Guys!” Lucy exclaimed at her siblings, her expression brightening suddenly.

In the end, half of our fighters went after Rosalie. The remaining forces were tasked with defending the village. Most of the fighters with us were male elven

warriors (and many of them were Lucy's brothers). There was also the Hero of Swaying Trees, Prince Leonardo, and Janet.

The chief would wait in Canaan so he could communicate with the other villages. He'd originally raved about coming with us, but his family had talked him down. Furiae and Florna were staying in the village, along with the majority of the female elves. Almost all elves were high rank mages, so the women were formidable as well.

Canaan's defense should be fine...unless things went *very* wrong.

We had already left for the Forest of Fiends. I was almost holding my breath as we progressed quietly through the area. It wasn't the same route I'd previously taken with Sasa; this was a shortcut to the Forest of Fiends that only the elf village knew. There were few monsters and it was a safe route...or, it should've been.

A thick mist lingered between the trees, even during the day. The massive branches of the demon trees—said to be over a millennium old—entwined into a canopy that blocked out the sun.

I felt something strange about it, though—the water elementals were restless.

"There are a lot of monsters," Janet commented quietly. She had a long-range scouting skill, so we could trust her judgment.

"What do you think, Lucy?" I asked.

"Yeah... I've never seen the area this noisy."

So even one of the locals felt a sense of unease. I could sense the tension of the warriors leading the way as we carefully progressed deeper into the forest.

That carried on for a while, when suddenly, a splitting pain assaulted my head.

What...?

It's...Sense Danger?

Suddenly, the elves at the vanguard halted.

No... They haven't just stopped...

They'd turned to stone. The instant I realized that, I cast.

"*Water Magic: Mist!*"

The spell conjured a thick blanket of fog, turning our vision pure white.

"Oh! How splendid!" came a jubilant voice. "I used *Petrifying Gaze* but once and found my vision blocked... The best response. I would gladly meet such a calm mage!"

I didn't even need to ask who this was—I remembered him.

"I have yet to introduce myself. I am Setekh the Magic Eye, beholden to our great and powerful Iblis. I apologize for keeping you waiting, warriors of Springrogue!"

He was definitely excitable... Setekh the Magic Eye. The *Eyes of Petrification*, I suppose. He must have managed to regenerate them.

This had gotten annoying.

"Everyone, come forth!" he called loudly.

All around us, monsters began baying.

"We're surrounded!" Lucy yelled. A moment later, I noticed as well—we were in the middle of an enemy swarm. Was this an ambush?

"Scatter!" Maximilian ordered. "We'll be a target if we stop!"

Everyone started moving at once.

"Sasa! You take the prince!"

"Got it!"

She could use *Stealth* and carry him on her own.

"Let's go, Lucy!" I grabbed hold of her hand and activated my own *Stealth* skill.

"W-Wai—"

"Be quiet," I said, cutting off her protest.

We moved away, quietly, and as fast as possible. The area was surrounded, but the monsters didn't form a literal wall. We could still get out of this.

"I'm over here, Hero of Springrogue." Setekh guffawed. "Won't you offer your name?"

I could hear his provocation. How did he know the hero was here? Was it his voice? I used *Listen* to try and ascertain, but I couldn't hear any fighting, so everyone must have gotten out of the area. We needed to do the same.

Using my skill, I faintly detected some snippets of speech. "How boring... Sciulli hasn't returned. His Majesty will soon..."

By soon, he means...tonight, during the full moon, right?

Was that actually true? I wasn't so sure, but we needed to get away first. We progressed with bated breath under the cover of the thick mist and *Stealth*. Eventually, the footfalls and growls of the monsters died out. *Scout* also told me the monsters were far away, so we'd made it...

I let out a sigh, then turned to my friend.

"Lucy, we ma— Wh-What?"

"I apologize. You said not to speak." The girl holding my hand seemed apologetic. The *blonde* girl. With sharp eyes.

Janet Ballantine.

I hadn't grabbed hold of Lucy. The instant I realized, my blood ran cold.

Wh-Where is she?!

I told myself to relax, setting *Calm Mind* to the maximum.

This was Lucy's birthplace. She knew the Great Forest and Wayward Woods well. She also knew how dangerous the Forest of Fiends was and how to hide. Her brothers were around too. If they had stuck together, they surely made it out.

There's also Sasa and...the prince.

Sasa had survived and thrived in Labyrinthos, and she possessed powerful skills. She was looking after the prince, so everyone should be fine...

Should be fine.

Okay, everything was fine. I was calm.

“Hero Makoto of Roses. This was unavoidable, so let us return—”

“Let’s head for the Demon Lord’s Grave,” I interrupted.

“What?!” Janet demanded. “You realize that there are only two of us here...?”

“Maximilian said ‘scatter,’ not ‘retreat.’” Everyone should still be in the Forest of Fiends. Well...just as long as I hadn’t misheard his order.

“It will be hours before reinforcements arrive!” argued Janet. “What good will it do if we progress alone?!”

“Lucy’s probably headed that way,” I said. I knew she had a tendency to rush headlong at things when she got fired up, so she would keep on going out of worry for her mother. “Prince Leonardo also has a strong sense of responsibility. He won’t be willing to escape on his own.”

“I can understand that. Still, won’t your comrade Aya Sasaki suggest a retreat?”

“Nah...I kinda doubt that.”

Sasa would know what I’d do. We’d known each other for a long time, so she was pretty familiar with how I usually thought. So...if I ran, it would defy my usual behavior pattern and we wouldn’t be able to meet up.

“I know I’m being a bit selfish,” I said, “so I don’t mind if you head back.”

“Don’t mock me! I would never leave you and run off on my own. I was tasked by Princess Sophia with the protection of the heroes of Roses.”

Oops. I’d pissed her off. Honestly, though, I was glad to have Janet with me. The long-range *Scout* and her spear skills were really reassuring.

“Let’s go, then. I’ll use *Stealth*, so keep hold of me.”

“I thought you were a more careful man, but you jump into danger just like my brother,” I heard her murmur in quiet dissatisfaction.

Heh, Gerry, you got told off by your sister.

Then, the pair of goddesses spoke up—they'd recently made a habit of mentally commentating on my life.

You're the same as Gerald, I heard Noah say.

Good luck, Makoooo, Eir added.

So, with that, Janet and I made our way slowly through the mist.

"Setekh regaining his *Eyes of Petrification* makes things much harder for us," Janet said through clenched teeth.

"The people he turned to stone...will they be all right?" Some of them were Lucy's brothers... Could they be restored? Perhaps with some item or spell...?

"Florna should be able to break the curse," Janet replied.

"The priestess..."

Furiae's face passed through my mind. Curses were her specialty. Had it been the wrong call for her to stay back? No—we needed her to be safe after the battle to restore the petrified people. It'd been good judgment. It must have been.

We carried further on in silence.

Hmmm, it's really quiet.

"Are your knights okay?" I asked. The Pegasus Knights had split—half of them in the village, the other half with us. Though now, our faction was completely broken.

"There will be no issues. The North Cardinal Knights are prepared to lay down their lives to defeat the demon lord."

I let out a stuttering sigh and a flat word of acknowledgment. That wasn't what I'd meant. She was certainly a serious woman. In some ways, she reminded me of Princess Sophia.

"What bothers me is the demons lying in ambush," she continued. "They seemed to know we were coming. Perhaps someone in Springrogue is feeding them information... What say you, Hero of Roses?"

A spy...was definitely something that would hinder us. It didn't quite ring true,

though.

“If it was a trap, he let us go pretty easily.” Even Maximillian had been there. Setekh should have been able to pursue us more vigorously to make sure he caught us.

“The minds of demons are confusing at best— Wait, Hero Makoto, stop.” Her *Scout* must have caught something. “There is a group of monsters ahead.”

“I haven’t picked up any— No, you’re right, there they are. A lot of them... They’re probably from Zagan’s subordinate...”

Which meant that the general—Jvāla of the Ten Fangs—would be there as well. *Stealth* didn’t work on high-rank demons, and there were thousands of monsters ahead. They were likely all ancient and all from the demon continent.

Right...going any farther is going to be difficult.

There were only two of us—an ultra rank knight and a mage apprentice.

“Hero Makoto...I cannot agree to charging them.”

“Don’t act like I’d tell you to commit suicide!” I griped. “We’re not fighting.”

What *were* we doing, though?

First things first—information gathering.

I activated *Listen*.

The monsters were noisy, but I needed to find out whether there was anything intelligible among them. Apparently, demons tended to enjoy intelligent conversation more as they gained higher ranks.

“Sir Setekh, my thanks for driving away those heroes.”

“Unfortunately, the witch was not present.”

“The rite for Sir Bifrons’s resurrection has safely been completed. However, I am impressed that *Darkness Magic* was usable, even during the day. The developments in magic over the past thousand years have been vast indeed.”

One of the voices was familiar... Setekh’s. However, there was something more important than his presence.

“Janet,” I whispered. “The resurrection has already happened.”

“I-Impossible! The sun should make that...”

The chief had said the same thing—he had been convinced the resurrection would take place during the night when demons were stronger.

“The ceremony will require some time until it can activate. Please guard the area until then, Sir Jvāla, Sir Setekh.”

“I pity any fool that challenges my army. Crimson Witch or not.”

This was the first time the voice from yesterday—Jvāla—had joined the conversation. And the first speaker...was probably Isaac, the archbishop of the Snake Sect.

“To think that you can use fate magic to see the future, Lord Isaac. Such power you possess.”

“Not at all, Sir Setekh. I am nothing before our great leader.” The man laughed.

Ha ha, I see. These three were reeeal chatty.

“At this rate, the demon lord will probably be back before night falls,” I whispered to Janet.

“Inconceivable...”

“Also, the ambush was because the archbishop—Isaac—can see the future,” I concluded.

The same as Furiae.

“So we don’t have a traitor...”

“Well, we might. The sect really likes scheming.”

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“Hmmm.” That was definitely the question.

The Demon Lord’s Grave was covered in high-rank demons and groups of monsters. Lucy and Sasa wouldn’t be here. And if those two weren’t here, then there was no reason for me to stick around either.

“Let’s head back and meet up with the people from Springrogue.”

If the worst came to pass, maybe it’d be best to summon Sakurai from Highland to deal with the resurrected demon lord. Actually, maybe Gerry would happily come marching over.

As I was considering this, something whipped over my head. Janet and I stiffened, but whatever it was plunged into the crowd of monsters. There was a low thud that shook the ground when it hit.

Suddenly, an explosion—a pillar of flames rocketed up. Not just one either, but many.

When I could finally comprehend what was happening, I saw countless balls of fire raining down.

Is that Lucy’s Meteo Rain? No...she can’t cast that many times...

“Rosalie! So you have arrived!”

“You sully our sacred lands with your presence, mage.”

“A champion of the heroes. Then we shall meet you in battle.”

Rosalie had apparently started an attack, and the demons were responding. Maybe she’d been listening to their conversation, just as we had. Each time a massive fireball landed, it engulfed part of the ground in flame. I couldn’t see anyone casting them either, so she must have been a fair distance away.

While that was happening, the incessant pillars of fire were setting trees alight. In response to the flames, monsters started acting out in shock. Though, being beasts in the demon lord’s army, they didn’t just scatter like normal animals would.

The smoke from the trees had already reached us, and the flames were spreading fast.

“Hero Makoto! The fire will get us if we stay here!”

“Right...let’s fall back.”

Getting caught up in Rosalie’s spell would be no laughing matter.

“Crafty, waiting for us to attack and then turning it back on us.” A fell wind

whipped up, accompanied by a whirlpool of incredible mana. That had probably come from Jvāla. His mana was even stronger than Sciulli's. Was Rosalie going to be all right?

"Lord Jvāla, if I may offer assista— Oh, what is this?"

An intense light filled the area just as Setekh spoke. Scorching heat followed immediately.

Sunlight...? No, something else.

In the harshness of the light, the mist faded.

"H-Hero Makoto?!" Janet yelped.

"Damn, we need to get out of here."

Once the fog had parted, the sky was visible. However, it was red. The area above the Forest of Fiends was covered in burning crimson light. And the source? Giants, made entirely of fire.

Those giants surrounded us. In Highland, my single water giant had engulfed five thousand monsters. I would bet money on each one of these being a king rank spell—after all, the water giant had been a king rank, and I'd only managed to conjure it when *Synchro*'d with Undyne.

Above us, there were now several of these massive giants.

No way... No way in hell...

A low rank fireball was one thing, but each king rank fire giant required ridiculous levels of mana. And around us, I could feel enough mana for hundreds of them. Could a human even control that much mana?

She probably borrowed it from the elementals. It must have taken a fair bit of time to collect it all... Still, surrounding the forest with spells of that level...

It really brought home the gulf in power between Rosalie and me.

I suddenly snapped back to focus. *This isn't a situation where I should be spacing out.*

"Let's get going," I said.

"We're surrounded! We'll never make it!" Janet cried out. "*Thunder Lance!*"

She used a spear technique to blast a hole in the earth—it was just big enough for two people to fit inside.

“Go!” she yelled, pulling me by the hand into the pit. It was a tight squeeze, but if I wrapped my arms around her, the both of us could barely fit.

Fire Magic: March of the Fire Giants.

Rosalie’s voice reached my ears via *Listen*.

An instant later, all I could hear was roaring.

The ground shook, and the wind was rushing past from the sheer heat of the attack. If we’d been above ground...things wouldn’t have ended well. The eardrum-rattling roar of noise and superheated air missed us, surging above the hole.

Lucy and Sasa weren’t nearby, right? I’d rather believe that Rosalie wouldn’t have caught her daughter in friendly fire.

“What kind of spell was that...?” Janet’s breath ghosted over my cheek as she spoke.

“We should probably stay put for a bit,” I said.

“You are...rather close. Then again, there isn’t much choice.”

Her face reddened as she cast a sideways look my way. *Calm Mind*, do your thing. We were in the same position. I used *Listen* to distract myself and figure out what was going on outside.

There were explosions and cries from monsters, along with the sounds of something crumbling.

Yeah, no point...

That was when I noticed one of the fire giants looking toward us.

Janet and I yelped.

Silence simmered between the three of us for a good ten seconds. The intimidation and heat made it hard to breathe. Still, the giant didn’t seem to be directing malice toward us.

Can it tell friend from foe? I wondered.

Then, the giant left.

Ph-Phew. We didn't get mistaken for monsters...

Explosions continued outside for a while.

"Her spell seems to be able to distinguish between monsters and people, so Lucy and Sasa wouldn't have gotten caught in the attack. I can certainly see why she's the number one mage on the continent."

As I spoke, I looked over at Janet. She was just mutely opening and closing her mouth.

Is she hyperventilating?

"Janet?" I asked, lightly slapping her cheek.

She started. "I'm fine... Please stop hitting me." She let out a deep sigh. "I truly thought I was about to die." Her eyes looked exhausted.

"That spell was incredible. It's really hot, though." I tried to use my hand to fan my face. It didn't do much of anything.

"How are you so calm?" she asked.

"I'm freaking out internally."

"You certainly don't look it..."

We kept chatting like that until we heard the magic ease off.

"It's gotten quiet," I observed. "I'm gonna check it out."

"Be careful."

Gingerly, I poked out of the hole and looked around.

The Forest of Fiends...was gone.

Every one of the trees had burned down. There wasn't a monster to be seen.

That's ridiculous, but...it doesn't look to be dangerous anymore.

I stepped out.

"Wah, that's hot!" The scorched plot beneath my feet was as hot as hell (literally). The trees had burned to ash. I pulled Janet out as well.

Oof, heavy... (Her armor.) I managed to help her up, and she just gaped at the sight.

Where the forest had once been, we could see way too far into the distance.

We should get out of here.

As I made that decision, a voice broke the silence. “Fools from Springrogue...? No, it would appear not. That armor makes me think you are from that wretch Abel’s country.”

Janet and I jolted at the malicious speech. I turned.

Behind us was a huge, jet-black centaur.

Crap, Jvāla. He survived her magic?!

“My army, entrusted to me by Lord Zagan... What a sight.”

Right—his monsters had all been destroyed. Rosalie was the one who’d done it, though. It didn’t seem to matter to him.

“I will crush you, scum.”

His massive hooves came down on us.

Dodge!

I grabbed Janet’s shoulder and used my skill to dodge. The place where we’d been standing moments ago was now home to a crater.

Then, there was a gust of wind, blasting ash all around us.

I yelped mentally. We were done for if that hit us.

“Thunder Lance!”

Janet’s spear bolted toward him, but he punched it negligently away.

“Worthless!”

Each time Jvāla kicked his back legs, the ground shook like an earthquake. His black body was covered in miasma of the same color, as well as vast amounts of mana. This creature was one of the right-hand demons to the rulers of the northern continent.

Yeah, there’s no fighting this.

I looked around. Water elementals had practically deserted the scorched plains that Rosalie had left behind.

My last hope was dashed. Which meant...

“Janet, use your most flashy spell.”

“Eh? U-Uh...but that won’t—”

“Just do it!”

“V-Very well. *Sun Magic: Thunderbolt!*”



Chantless ultra rank magic! The same spell Gerry used too. They're definitely siblings.

At her words, a massive bolt of lightning dropped from the sky toward the black demon— “Too slow.”

—and missed.

“He managed to dodge?”

“This is one of the demon lord’s direct subordinates,” she said, a sorrowful look on her face. “On our own, we can’t...”

No, we couldn’t beat him. However, I hadn’t asked for her spell so we could try and defeat Jvāla—the flashy magic would’ve been too obvious. In actuality...

We just needed to stall.

Water Magic: Mist.

I doubted it would work, but it was worth a shot. Our surroundings were immediately covered in dense fog.

“Do you think you can escape?!” Jvāla roared. The volume of his shout scattered the mist, and I saw his massive frame coming for us.

It didn’t work!

Dodge...

Jvāla’s attack left only a grazing blow, but it still sent us flying.

Hurry up already!

As if my mind had summoned my wish, a yell suddenly thundered through the air.

“Hah ha!”

Someone clad in red aura leaped forward and kicked the demon right on the crown of his head. At the same time, fire burst from the point of impact, immolating the centaur.

“Graaahhh!” he screamed as he burned.

Beside the flames, Rosalie landed lightly on the ground.

Whew. Thank goodness she'd arrived. I could relax.

"You okay, kids?" she asked teasingly.

"You're a lifesaver," I replied, while Janet couldn't manage to string together a sentence.

However, the moment of respite did not last.

"Such pointless surprise attacks, Crimson Witch." The jet-black demon stepped from the towering flames.

That blow hadn't even damaged him?

"Sorry I'm late," Rosalie remarked with an easy laugh. "That stony friend of yours took a while to deal with."

She'd...taken out Setekh? I hadn't even seen his eyes... Well, not that I could have either way.

"That useless fool... Still, it seems he managed to land a hit."

"Your arm!" Janet suddenly yelled.

Indeed, Rosalie's left arm was a hard, ashen gray. She'd been petrified?

"Man, I let my guard down a bit. I might have trained my magic resistance in the demon realm, but the legendary eyes still managed to get through it." There was no sadness in her voice. If anything, she sounded entertained.

"Fool...exposing yourself like that," Jvāla proclaimed, looking down at her.

"Hah! If you want to beat me, you'd better bring at least a demon lord. Call it a handicap!"

At least her confidence was still intact.

"That arrogance will be your undoing!" The fell wind from Jvāla approached Rosalie. She just smiled challengingly, glowing red and matching the breeze with her own. The shining winds clashed, shedding shock waves that headed toward Janet and me.

We knelt to make sure the overspill wouldn't send us flying. A battle between the demon lord's subordinate and the Crimson Witch was unfolding right in front of us...

It's too fast, though! I can't see a thing! I felt like a manga character who couldn't keep up with the power creep... I glanced to Janet at my side.

"I-Incredible... Those movements!" Apparently, she *could* follow it. Well, that was an ultra rank knight for you. It was beyond a mage apprentice like me.

Since I wasn't going to get anything out of watching the battle, I looked around our surroundings. The wreckage spanned almost as far as I could see—in the distance, I spotted a small flash of green. The Great Forest. Rosalie had apparently contained the destruction pretty well.

People seemed to have been drawn by the fighting, and I used *Clairvoyance* to take a look. This group wasn't made up of monsters or demons, but of familiar people.

Sasa and Lucy! Prince Leonardo and Maximilian were there too, along with some of the elven warriors from Canaan.

Great, everyone was safe. None of them came rushing over, though. Everyone was gingerly picking their way across the scorched plains toward us.

The reason for their caution was...

Janet yelped from next to me, and when I turned, I saw dozens of pillars of fire and several explosions.

Rosalie sure doesn't do half-measures.

I couldn't see anything, but *Listen* picked up grunts and cries of dismay from Jvāla...along with extended spans of laughter from Rosalie.

I guess she's a bit of a battle junkie? Either way, it looks like she's got the advantage.

"Makoto!"

"Takatsuki!"

Lucy and Sasa called out for me—the noise of combat must have drawn them closer. Maximilian, Prince Leonardo, and all the other elves were with them.

"I'm glad you're both safe," I said. And that was exactly what I was feeling.

However, the smile on my face was...*not* matched by those two.

“Say, Aya. Makoto’s holding Janet’s hand.”

“Ha ha ha, don’t be silly, Lu. Janet doesn’t like Takatsuki.”

Hearing the conversation, Janet dropped my hand like it had scalded her. “D-Don’t misunderstand! It isn’t like that!”

“Right. I used *Dodge* and Janet took charge of the offense,” I explained honestly.

Lucy and Sasa gave ambivalent hums as they looked coldly at us.

Why?!

“Um! Makoto?” Prince Leonardo exclaimed, breaking through the awkward air. “Is the fight over there...between Rosalie and the demon army’s leader?!”

Nice one! You got us back on track.

“She’s fighting Jvāla—one of Bifrons’s subordinates. She seems to be doing better than...” I trailed off. “Oh.”

As I’d been speaking, a massive explosion drew our gazes. Then, a blackened corpse fell to the ground. A shining red figure who looked to be wreathed in magma stepped forward, standing where the other had fallen.

The red light soon faded away to reveal blonde hair, blue eyes, and a person who was very close to Lucy.

“Phew, he was quite the opponent.” Rosalie wore a satisfied expression. I couldn’t see any real injuries on her...apart from her petrified arm.

Wow, she beat him one-handed...

“Mama, your arm!” Lucy yelled.

“It’s fine,” Rosalie said soothingly. “I’ll just get Florna to fix it later.”

“Magnificent!” Maximilian exclaimed.

“Oh, Maxie, you brought everyone here? That’s a good lad.”

Whoa...she’s treating Springrogue’s hero like a kid.

Wait, whoops, that’s not the important thing here...

“Rosalie,” I called. “I heard from the demons that Bifrons’s resurrection has

already taken place.”

Everyone present turned to stare, and they cried out in shock.

“Well, I did have a bit of a bad feeling...” Rosalie mused. “That’s why I burned it all down.” She gestured to the newly scorched clearing that had once been the Forest of Fiends, though she didn’t seem bothered by the loss.

Doesn’t that seem like a bit of an overreaction? Still...she’d certainly beat the demons to the punch.

“You could have *said* something, mama,” Lucy complained. “Grandpa was furious.”

“Ack. Guess I’ll be traveling for a while then,” she replied easily.

Just as things seemed to be relaxing, someone broke the calm.

“Ahh, I see... They were all worthless, useless trash.”

A man was suddenly standing in front of us. He wasn’t from Springrogue. Nor was he a demon. There was, however, something *off* about him.

“An undead...?” Sasa murmured. I’d thought the same. After all, the man’s neck was twisted off its axis by more than ninety degrees. A human could never have survived that.

“No. That’s a puppet being controlled,” Rosalie explained calmly. “The man before us isn’t the same as the one who’s speaking.”

“The Crimson Witch... I didn’t think you had returned. How unpleasant to run into you,” the broken-necked man spat hatefully.

“You’re...Archbishop Isaac from the Snake Sect, aren’t you?” I guessed. The man’s gaze swung to me.

“Hmph. The State-Authorized Hero of Roses... You seem to be a thorn in our side, no matter where we go.”

Apparently, I was on the money. Isaac was pulling his usual crap and staying out of sight. In contrast to the vitriolic words coming from his mouth, the puppet’s face was blank. He didn’t blink, just stared into the distance, and he moved like a doll—his mouth was the only part of him in motion. Even so, the

anger was clear in Isaac's voice.

"Well...no matter. You will all die here, with Springrogue soon to follow. It is inevitable."

"I think not," Maximilian denied shortly, gripping a greatsword that shone with light. The sword was called Clarent and was considered to be the strongest sword in Springrogue.

Yup, definitely a hero. That's so cool!

Makoto, take this seriously, Noah interjected as my thoughts turned slightly frivolous.

Rosalie and the country's hero are both here, though... Would I even be needed?

Be careful, Mako.

Eir? I thought back. She was usually so playful and flighty, but her warning had been utterly serious.

"You think you can destroy this country by yourself?" Rosalie asked.

The puppet's mouth opened. However, it wasn't an answer that left his lips.

I offer this to you, my lord Typhon.

Once that left his mouth, the controlled man began to cackle. His neck was still off-kilter as he gripped a small orb of metal in his hand. This orb was apple-shaped and decorated with the motif of two snakes intertwining. Soon, the thing began to glow.

"It's been a while, Bifrons."

In an instant, the man's voice changed—he now sounded like a young boy whose voice had yet to break.

"Revival is impossible, though. Your soul aches."

The voice was...familiar. I'd heard it before in the capital of Roses. And, I remembered Noah telling me who it belonged to...

"The Great Demon Lord Iblis...?"

Everyone whirled to look at me as I murmured the words.

“I’m sad you won’t remember me.”

“Makoto! Is this really Iblis’s voice?!” Prince Leonardo exclaimed.

“Fire Storm!” Without waiting for an answer, Rosalie launched her spell and immolated the broken-necked man.

“Yet your reincarnation is worth celebrating.”

The voice didn’t stop, though. Even as the man burned, it continued.

“Now, be reborn.”

Several strange, keening cries echoed across the scorched area. Strange globby creatures, black as tar, oozed over the ground. The offensive screeching was coming from them. Most eye-catching among them was a large monster that looked something like a hill. Its body was impaled with countless arms and legs that writhed like tentacles. Even looking at the creature was unpleasant.

“This is a blessing of both a wonderful new king and wonderful beasts!”

Even as the boy’s voice rose in proclamation, it cut out. All that was left were the profane monsters in front of us. An *RPG Player* selection screen drifted up in front of me.

Will you challenge Bifrons and these children, failures of Iblis?

Yes

No

I wasn’t sure what to think. Iblis...not another demon lord?

“Tch...blight monsters from a demon lord of an upper world? This is annoying...”

For the first time, I heard some unease in Rosalie’s voice.

This happened several years ago.

We were in Highland Castle being taught by the Grandsage. The students were all heroes, priestesses, or other important people who would run the country in the future. I was nothing more than an ultra rank knight, but my brother Gerald had managed to get me included.

The white-robed sage floated through the air before us, looking at her students. "Listen up, children. A thousand years ago, your upbringing would have seen you ground to dust in an instant."

"What, exactly? I'd be fine, you hag. My Hero of Lightning skill means I could ki—guh!"

"Call me teacher, brat."

The Grandsage had kicked him. Honestly...big brother...

"Gerald," Noelle chided. "Take this seriously." She was called the reincarnation of Anna the Holy Mother...and she was my brother's fiancée. We'd been close ever since I was young.

Lately though, Noelle and I had barely spoken... Even if I used to look up to her as an older sister...well, she was not my brother's betrothed anymore.

"Grandsage, what abilities did the Great Demon Lord have?" I asked.

"Hmph, so your sister is better behaved. I'll answer then. His most annoying abilities were Transmigration and Awakening."

Noelle and I spoke at the same time.

"Transmigration and Awakening?"

"What kind of spells were they?"

"His subordinates kept coming back, even when we thought we'd killed them. That's the first skill, Awakening," answered the Grandsage.

"Like the undead?" I asked. Undead monsters were weak to sun magic,

though. My brother or Noelle could easily take them down.

“They were not undead,” countered the Grandsage. “They were reborn. Awakening allowed the demon lord to mold them into even higher existences.”

“Higher existences?” we all asked in sync, questioning the unfamiliar term.

“You probably think our world is the only one out there, don’t you? Not so—it’s actually just one of an infinite number of realms. Iblis came from one of those other realms. The denizens of that world appear to be far stronger than the people of our own.”

I don’t get it... I thought. None of the others seemed to either.

“Hah! That’s bull. Other realm or not, we can just beat the crap out of him!”

My brother was a simple person. As far as he was concerned, strength was everything.

The Grandsage just laughed. “I like your fire, Gerald. However, those superior existences are terrifying. We inhabitants of the lower realms can’t even look at them. Doing so degrades our spirits.”

We all fell silent. We couldn’t even look at them? How was that fair? Was there even anything we could do?

“Well, heroes and priestesses would be fine thanks to the goddesses’ protection. Calming skills can also allow even normal people to withstand their presence.” The Grandsage paused, allowing us to absorb this information, before continuing. “Now, the Great Demon Lord’s Awakening could manifest higher beings, however, there was an annoying byproduct—blight monsters.”

Blight monsters were a type of monster that Iblis had commanded a thousand years ago. There were legions of them and they were all...wrong.

“Hag...Teacher. Where are the blight monsters?”

That was my brother—he didn’t repeat his earlier mistake.

“Iblis felt alone having come to our world from another,” the Grandsage explained. “He used Transmigration and Awakening to try and turn his subordinate monsters and demons into elevated existences like himself. The ones that failed became blight monsters—unsightly beasts that should not exist

in this world.”

“So they don’t exist anymore?” I asked.

“There are a few still on the northern continent, but other than those, all of them were destroyed. As long as no more are created, you will never see one. I only know of Iblis himself as someone capable of using Transmigration.”

“Hm, so if the failures became blight monsters, what happened to the ones he succeeded in elevating?” My brother asked cheekily.

“They simply got stronger,” the Grandsage answered. “Setekh the Magic Eye was the most famous success. He was originally a pitiful undead, but Iblis rebirthed him into an upper-rank demon with a magic eye.”

“That...was one of the demons Abel the Savior destroyed, right?” Noelle asked.

“Indeed. Setekh with his Eyes of Petrification and Cain, the Wicked Deity’s Disciple, killed all heroes a thousand years ago...apart from Abel.”

That was a famous legend.

The demon lord Cain was known as “the Wicked Deity’s Disciple,” “the Mad Hero,” and “the Enemy of Humanity.” A thousand years ago, he killed many heroes single-handedly.

The legends told that Cain had no subordinates of his own for some reason—he just roamed the world killing heroes. Setekh was said to have been friendly with him, and according to what the Grandsage had just said, Setekh had been transmigrated by Iblis. Legends also told that Setekh had been strong enough to become of the demon lords but had always refused the appointment.

“Either way, Abel killed them, so you needn’t worry. The problem is the blight monsters—they lose their sense of self and do not even function as living creatures. They cannot even breed. However, though failures they may be, they are still higher-realm creatures. Challenging them recklessly will see you devoured. If you ever come across one, choose your partners carefully. The weak will just be eaten.”

We all nodded seriously.

"I can't wait..." my brother said with a wide smile. He really did like to fight.

Recently, the reports of blight dragons in Labyrinthos had gotten him fired up. Unfortunately, he hadn't been allowed to battle them—politics had gotten in the way, since Highland was hoping to give the otherworlder Hero of Light some legitimacy... My brother had been enraged.

Though...he'd been happily training to rematch the Hero of Roses lately...

"Put bluntly, your first call if you meet a blight monster should be to flee. The underworld miasma they possess erodes the mind, and they cannot be fought in a frontal attack. Heroes are a different matter, but normal people will have to get used to it more gradually."

We all chorused back an acknowledgment. Yet despite her words, I couldn't picture a beast like that. My brother or the Soleil Knights could surely defeat any terrifying monsters though. Besides, we had the Grandsage too.

Back then, I'd been so sure that we'd be fine...



Presently, we were in the ruins of the Forest of Fiends. The air was thick and cloying, full of miasma. That wasn't the only issue.

The unpleasant cacophony grated on my ears—cackling laughter and the screams of the dead. They were voices cursing all that lived, melding together into a discordant symphony.

I took in the area, moving only my eyes.

We were surrounded by black, dripping monsters with slime-like skin. They wriggled and writhed, morphing as they tried to become something...or perhaps give birth to something? Staring at them made my mind start to feel funny.

My head hurts... I can't feel my hands and I'm shaking... That stench is awful as well... This must be the underworld miasma the Grandsage was talking

about...

If I stayed here, I'd pass out sooner or later...

"Wind elementals, blow!" Rosalie cried, blasting the miasma away.

That helped me to recover slightly. I was no longer feeling like I wanted to die. When I tried to speak I could only manage inarticulate noises. Had I forgotten how to talk? How did I do it? Then, I felt a soft strike at my shoulder.

"Janet? Are you okay?" came a voice by my ear. That person pulled my shoulder toward them. I peered over. Hero Makoto of Roses, the man I'd been with earlier, was there.

Even surrounded by monsters, I relaxed at the sight of his face.

"U-Um..." I stammered.

"You look pale. Rest for a bit."

My heartbeat slowed as I listened to his calm voice. He had me drink a restorative potion and I gradually calmed down. Then, I looked at everyone in the area.

Huh? What in the...

The elves from the village that had come to save us, and all my knights, were on their knees. Some of them had even passed out. The only ones still keeping their composure were Rosalie and Maximilian, the girl called Aya...and Makoto Takatsuki. Everyone else looked ill at the least.

"Hey, Lucy. Need some water?" he asked, moving away from me to support his comrade.

"Y-Yeah..."

You could have stayed with me for a little long— What am I thinking?!

I was the commander of the Pegasus Knights. I heaved myself to my feet to examine my comrades. All of them were at least conscious.

"Use your *Serenity* skills," Rosalie instructed. "Also, keep your eyes away from the blight monsters. You should avoid looking at the demon lord in particular—it will poison your minds. Maxie, you have Freya's sword, right?"

“I-I do.”

The two of them still seemed ready to fight. I couldn’t help but admire that.

“Can you release it?” she asked.

Heroes with their goddesses’ protection could “release” their patrons’ swords to draw out true power. There were only seven such blades in the world, and only the goddesses’ heroes could release them.

Gerald was putting in so much effort to gain usage of Caliburn.

“Of course!”

The dragonoid hero readied a sword even bigger than he was. The blade began to shine green, and it gave off a refreshing breeze.

“By Freya’s blessings,” he said. The words prompted a pleasant mist of mana to fill the area around him. The elves and knights—including me—relaxed at that.

Incredible... This is a hero’s power...

Heroes received blessings from their goddesses and stood above people as a symbol of hope. *He must be able to defeat the demon lord...* That’s probably what everyone else thought. Despite that...

“Hmm, that’s only around half of its potential power, right?” Rosalie asked, her voice hard.

“Y-Yes. I only managed to release the sword about a year ago...” Maximillian said apologetically. It seemed like more than enough power to me, but apparently, it wasn’t. I seemed to remember Gerald saying he could only draw seven-tenths of the potential power from Caliburn.

“It wouldn’t be a problem if I was at full power...” Rosalie explained. “But, I need to keep my mana going so Setekh’s curse won’t claim the rest of my body. I’m not currently at full power.” Rosalie’s face was troubled.

“What...?” The hero’s expression tightened at that.

“Why not teleport back to Canaan and get the priestess to heal you?” Hero Makoto asked.

That was right! That was an option!

“It won’t work. Even she will need time to undo a curse of this level. While she’s doing that, you’ll be wiped out.”

“I see...” he replied, slumping.

“You, Hero of Ice and Snow,” Rosalie called out. “Do you have your sword?”

“I do...but I cannot yet release Ascalon...”

“Well, that figures.”

As they spoke, the screeching of the monsters carried on.

Suddenly, I heard someone scream as a black, birdlike monster attacked. The “bird” had wings and a body, but no head. Instead, dozens of mouths were gaping across its flesh.

Was that a blight monster?!

“*Sun Magic: Flash Arrow*,” Rosalie cast. The spell pierced through—holes appeared throughout the monster and it writhed in agony.

I-It...wasn’t dead from that?

“This is bad,” Rosalie warned. “The monsters around us have been blighted by Iblis’s voice. They’ll be stronger than normal.”

“Rosalie, I will defeat Bifrons with this sword,” Maximilian said with surety.

“Hmm, but can you manage with only half its power...?” she mused.

“What other choice is there?! ” he demanded.

“I could join you... But I’d be worried about the kids back here. Plus, I’ve only got the one arm.” Rosalie seemed worried for once, trying to decide whether to join the local hero against the demon lord or defeat the blight monsters.

“Ah, Rosalie? Would my treasure work?” the Hero of Roses interjected.

How is he so calm?

Maximilian refused. “Sir Makoto, I appreciate the offer, but you need a holy sword to defeat a demon lord.”

However, Rosalie’s expression changed.

“Hm? Hang on. Are you talking about that dagger?”

“I am. My goddess gave it to me.”

Rosalie glared steadily at it. “Show me its release.”

“What’s a release?”

“It doesn’t matter—just show me how strong it is.”

He sighed, scratching his head as he raised the blade. “Eir...help, please. Right, call it an advance...”

I could hear him mumble *something*, but not exactly what. When I moved closer to try and hear, I was rewarded with a faint voice in my head.

You’re such a needy boy, Mako.

I could see *someone’s hand* on the hero’s dagger...but then, I felt dizzy. It was a sense of pressure on an utterly different level to the blight monsters. My breath caught in my throat as fear crushed my chest. Then, a chill raced over my skin.

Wh-What the...?!

The blight monsters turned to us as one. They were all focused on Makoto Takatsuki...

On the one who would destroy them.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

I feel like everyone’s staring...

Rosalie, Maximilian, the other elves, Janet, her knights, and even the blight monsters surrounding us were all looking my way.

I do appreciate the help, Eir... But that might’ve been too much.

Just then, rain began falling from the sky.

Did the updrafts from Rosalie’s spells form clouds? I thought on it for a moment but decided that the wind likely wasn’t enough to cause this. Maybe the rain was a coincidence. Or...Eir doing me a solid...?

Either way, the rain was lucky for me—there were at least a few water

elementals gathering around the area now.

“Hey!” Rosalie exclaimed with sparkling eyes. “How’d you do that?”

“Um...I asked Eir...” I replied vaguely. I glanced away, feeling awkward, though I wasn’t quite sure why. After all, it wasn’t like I’d done anything wrong. Maybe I felt this way because I’d asked *Eir* for help instead of Noah...?

“B-But...” a dazed Janet stammered. “I thought you were a State-Authorized Hero...?”

Oh, right... State-Authorized Heroes are basically ascended adventurers—they don’t have the goddess’s blessing like other heroes, so my dagger shouldn’t have this kind of power...

However, I didn’t think the group would let me fight without proving myself in some way.

“Was that...*direct interference*...rather than a *blessing*?” Rosalie mused. “Is that even possible?” Peering at my dagger, she placed a hand on her chin and a deep frown spread across her face.

Maximilian and Prince Leonardo were both wide-eyed and frozen.

“Is that dagger from the Godslayer?”

“Godslayer?” I parroted. I seemed to remember hearing Setekh say something similar.

“Takatsuki, what’s the Godslayer?” Sasa asked, poking her head out from behind me. She was actually a lamia, so being surrounded by the blight monsters didn’t bother her.

“I don’t actually know,” I admitted.

“Aya...the Godslayer is a fragment of a weapon used in Titanomachia...” explained Lucy. “Wait... *That’s* what your dagger is? Let me look.”

“Sure, here you go.” I handed over my blade, and Lucy and Sasa both inspected it closely, murmuring in amazement as they did.

While they poured over it, the prince looked up at me. “Makoto, where did you get that dagger?”

“Umm, from...my goddess,” I answered, keeping the truth about the *type* of goddess unspoken. If I wasn’t cautious concerning what I said about Eir, he’d find out later. I’d need to be careful.

The Crimson Witch suddenly burst into laughter.

“Rosalie?”

“You’re the best! We’re killing a demon lord, but you brought a weapon to kill a god? That’ll be more than enough.”

Maximilian seemed utterly bewildered. “R-Rosalie? Will Sir Makoto be joining us?”

“Well, there’s an advantage in numbers, right?” She then turned to Sasa. “You’ll be fine too, right?”

“Yup, I’ll back Takatsuki up!” she said, swinging around the Fierce Deity’s Hammer (which was currently over two meters long). I hadn’t seen it in a while.

“I-Is that...the Fierce Deity’s Hammer from a thousand years ago?” I heard Janet ask in shock. “Someone’s wielding it?”

I doubted anyone but Sasa even *could* use it. That thing was *heavy*.

“You need to be careful, though,” Rosalie told me. “If you get too close to blight monsters who’ve been reincarnated into superior existences, then you won’t be able to stand up against their miasma. Only heroes with blessings can stand up to their touch. Well, Aya over there would probably be fine too.”

Rosalie’s look over at Sasa was meaningful. After all, she knew my friend was a lamia, though she didn’t seem interested in outing her for it. The more strong allies we had, the better.

“Maxie has a blessing and Aya’s race makes her more resilient. So, Mr. Boyfriend, what’re you doing?”

“Hmm, let’s think.”

Fighting up close out of the question. My stats were too pitiful for that...

Wait right there! Why aren’t you asking me?! Noah demanded.

Well...do you have a suggestion?

Guh, if I wasn't sealed away here, I would!

Eir started giggling. *What about asking me, then? I'll let you change over without a penalty charge.*

I'm not converting. Still, it looks like Noah can't help this time...

F-Five years! Noah blurted out. *If you give me five years of lifespan, I'll give you a divine rank barrier!*

Suicide magic? I didn't think you wanted me to use that...

W-Well, I can't help otherwise!

How long would that barrier last, powered by five years of my lifespan?

There was a long pause.

Th-Thirty minutes, Noah mumbled.

That's it?! Well, I suppose I can't get in close to attack without a barrier... I would just need to take it on the chin.

"I think I'll be able to manage the miasma," I told Rosalie.

"Oh? How?"

How indeed, Noah? Oh, like this, maybe?

I pressed the blade of the dagger into my arm and let blood start to flow. Then, I began to pray.

Noah, I offer this to you.

I gave a silent grunt as I felt the lifespan getting ripped from my body.

All right! Here we go, Makoto! Noah cheered. Then, her tone immediately changed—a beautiful voice echoed in my ears.

By my name as Goddess Noah—protect Makoto, Divine Armor.

My surroundings were softly enveloped in dim light. This was divine rank magic? It was...less dramatic than I'd— Suddenly, screeches and yells split the air. *Eck, the monsters really didn't like that...* The warped demon lord with countless eyes all over its body had every one of them fixed on me. Gross.

"Whoa, forbidden magic." Rosalie grinned at me. Guess it was pretty clear

that I was using suicide magic.

“W-We don’t have much time, so let’s go,” I said, trying to prevent an interrogation.

“There’s so much to ask...but yep, we’re short on time!” Rosalie agreed. “You heroes can deal with the demon lord. Lucy and I will take out the blight monsters!” She threw an arm around Lucy’s shoulders.

“What? Mama?” Lucy was still unsteady on her feet from the miasma. She probably felt much safer with her mother, though.

“U-Um!” the prince interjected. “Makoto, I’ll come with you!”

Oops. Yeah, he was a hero too. I just...

“Leo, you stay with me,” Rosalie instructed, refusing his request.

“But...”

“You’ll be in the way,” she replied bluntly.

He hung his head in shame.

Personally, I was happier with him staying beside Lucy and her mom. I glanced over at Janet and got a nod in return. She’d help protect him too. Even if she did still look kind of unwell...

With all of that settled, Sasa and I rushed toward the demon lord alongside Maximillian.

“Lucy, we’re going to cast together,” said Rosalie. “You should be able to use a saint rank spell or two at this point.”

“Wha... Saint rank? But I only have a skill for king rank!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?! Considering who your parents are, saint rank should be nothing! I’ll demonstrate—make sure you pay attention.”

“What?! Now?!”

My *Listen* skill carried the cute conversation between mother and daughter to me. *You’re going to be using saint rank magic, Lucy... You’ve grown so much.*

“Mama! That’s hot! Why’s it hot?!”

Rosalie chuckled. “Your mana’s perfect. It’s more fire-aligned than mine. Ahh, I’m getting chills.”

“Mama, this is getting away from us! It’s scary! The hell are you trying to do?!”

“We’re going to start with *Synchro* and the seventh saint rank.”

“What, just like that?! Wait, I need to get ready.”

“Sure, you get a countdown. Three, two, one, go!”

The sheer energy of those two seemed to have pulled the blight monsters’ attention. However, it did sound like they were having fun. Everything was fine, just as long as they didn’t go too far and lose control of the spell...

We were nearly at our battleground.

Compared to the other blight monsters, the one before us was aberrant. It was as big as a seven—maybe even an eight—story building. The body was covered in black tentacles, and its form slowly shifted over time. This was the lingering remnant of Bifrons, reborn through the transmigration. As we neared, I could see that its tentacles seemed to end in hands.

“Huh? It’s grabbing the others,” said Sasa.

I followed Sasa’s pointing finger and saw that the massive ex-demon lord’s tentacles had wrapped around nearby blight monsters. They screeched pitifully as they were dragged into the demon lord’s bloated body.

“It...ate them?” I asked.

“Yes,” Maximilian confirmed. “It can absorb things if they get too close.”

What happened to the miasma being the problem, Rosalie?

“Takatsuki! Monsters!”

On top of all of that, several blight monsters were advancing on us.

“We’ll need to deal with them first,” I said.

“Understood!” Maximilian readied his massive sword.

Hurricane Blade!

As he swung, a huge twister spun around the monsters, slicing them to ribbons.

“Hi-yah!” Sasa cried, slamming her massive hammer into one of the monsters and blasting it backward.

She was dealing with the fast ones. As for me...

“It’s huge.”

A massive boar-shaped monster—about three times bigger than an African elephant—was lumbering toward me. If it’d been just a boar, things would’ve been fine...but for some reason, it had a human face.

Bleh, that’s gross!

“xxxxx(Hey, elementals,)” I called out.

“xxx(Heyyy!)”

Water Elemental Unity.

I pulled together the water elementals with my dagger and used them to form a blade of mana. Turning to the massive monster, I leveled my dagger, and let the energy scythe out.

Mana ripped through the beast—the monster’s flesh split apart and flew back.

Even so, the mana blade was too weak, so it didn’t outright *kill* the blight boar. *Sasa or Maximillian can finish it off*, I decided.

For the next little while, I warded off monsters as they attacked us.

“Watch out!”

Out of nowhere, a huge arm snatched me away from where I was standing, scooping me up in an evasive leap.

Guh!

Right where I’d been moments before, a ginormous black monster fell. The impact split the ground, even gouging out a crater.

Too close... Noah's barrier or not, I didn't want that thing landing on me.

"Th-Thanks, Maximilian."

"Look sharp, Sir Makoto." The manly dragonoid hero was glaring out at the monsters. So cool!

"Takatsuki! You're okay!" Sasa called as she ran to me. It seemed like the other blight monsters had mostly been dealt with.

"Hmm. That one was headed for Rosalie," Maximilian pointed out.

The dark form of the huge monster was unbalanced. Above the torso, it had three heads and more than a dozen arms. However, its lower half was like an immense horse with eight legs.

"Did that monster...use to be a subordinate of Zagan's?" I asked. "The one Rosalie defeated—Jvāla?"

"It seems so. At least, judging from its appearance."

Would Rosalie be okay? In addition to fighting, she was tasked with protecting the elves and the prince. And certainly, becoming a blight monster would have made Jvāla stronger...

"Sasa. We'll be fine here—would you go help Lucy and the prince?"

"Hm? I mean, I can...but are you staying here? It's dangerous."

"I'll be okay for another twenty minutes." That's how much longer Noah's barrier would hold out.

"Got it. I'll see you soon." With that, she rocketed off toward Rosalie.

"Sasa!" I yelled. "Don't push yourself too much! Let Rosalie help with the stronger enemies!"

"Riiight."

I guess she heard me. Then again, with her extra lives, she'd probably be fine regardless.

"Maximilian," I called out. "I'll keep an eye on our surroundings, so you go for the demon lord."

“Very well!” he proclaimed, hefting his goddess’s blade. Soon, a dense layer of mana covered him. The sword glowed with a green light and started emitting wind.

While he was getting ready, I kept watch to make sure none of the blight monsters blindsided us. The ones that’d been close to the demon lord were mostly dealt with, but the rest were crowded around Rosalie. Occasionally, a billowing cross of fire would bloom in the sky.

It seemed like they were fine.

As I observed the scene, Maximilian was gathering mana in his sword.

Is it some sort of special attack? I wondered. I glanced his way, and then...

The wind suddenly stopped.

Wah?

The raging gale... His mana... All of it had suddenly gone quiescent.

“Maximilian?” I asked.

There was no reply.

“Did something hap—”

As I turned to look, my mouth snapped shut.

Where the Hero of Swaying Trees had been standing, there was now a large, petrified statue.

How?!

“Hello, human! Goodbye, human!”

Setekh... I was sure Rosalie had defeated him...but he was in front of us once again. Just like the last time I saw him, there were cracks running across his skin, but now, he had a pair of bloodred eyes glowing brightly in his sockets.

Those were the legendary *Eyes of Petrification*!

We locked gazes for a moment. Setekh peered at me oddly.

Uh? What’s going on? The silence stretched further as Setekh tilted his head at me. *I guess I should try attacking?*

Water Elemental Unity: Water Blade.

I sent forth a wave of water from my mana blade.

“Whoa!” Setekh arched back into a bridge position to dodge it. Did he think this was *The Matrix*? Regardless, he sure seemed relaxed.

“Th-That’s strange... Why aren’t you stone...?” he murmured. “Well, no matter! Time for a direct attack!”

He was fast, just as fast as Sasa or Gerald—maybe even faster! His jet-black claws closed in on me, ready to swipe through the rest of my life.

D-Dodge!

Damn it! Not enough!

There was a bizarre “fwahn” sound as his claws bounced off the space surrounding my body.

Both of us gasped in shock.

“A-Again!” he yelled in a fluster. However, “fwaahhhn,” was all his wicked claws managed to accomplish. It was like they had smacked into a cushion a dozen or so centimeters away from my skin.

Must be Noah’s armor. The protection was just as good as I’d expected for having cost me years off my life. The sound effect was kinda dumb, but I was still wrapped in an invisible cushion.

You could even survive atmospheric reentry! I heard Noah say smugly. I could see her puffing up in my mind’s eye. Seriously, wow!

“I-Impossible. My *Eyes of Petrification* do nothing, and my attacks cannot reach you...” Setekh slumped to the ground in despair.

I’m shocked too, buddy. Overall, I was conflicted about what to do. Setekh was a major enemy of ours. I glanced over at the life-size statue of Maximillian. *I’ll get Furiae to fix you later, I promised mentally, so just hang in there!*

Then, I looked up at “Bifrons.” Even now, the beast was an overwhelming presence. I quickly decided that this...thing...had to be taken out first. Ready my dagger, I approached the building-sized monster.

“W-Wait!” cried Setekh in anguish. “If you are the Wicked Deity Noah’s disciple, why are you standing against us?! Did she not fight against the heroes of the Sacred Deities a millennium ago?!”

Ugh, he caught me.

Setekh hadn’t possessed eyes when we last met, so this was the first time he’d seen me.

“Sorry, but I can’t ally with Iblis this time.” I wouldn’t follow the same path as my predecessor.

“But why not?!”

Why? Well, if I remember right, Noah mentioned...

“A thousand years ago, I believe your god betrayed mine.”

Right, Noah?

That’s right! Noah confirmed. That damned Typhon tricked me! I won’t trust him again!

Yup, he lied to Noah a thousand years ago. Well, she does seem like the type to fall for scams like that.

What?! exclaimed Noah, sounding offended.

Pfft, he sure told you.

Shut it, Eir! I’ll smack you!

Ha ha, your punches feel more like tickles since you’re sealed away!

Mrrgh!

Goddesses, pipe down! You’re killing the tension!

“I see... Typhon broke the pact with Noah...” Setekh’s shoulders slumped. “I was so looking forward to fighting alongside another disciple of hers...” His voice sounded almost grieving as he fell back into nostalgia. The look on his face made me feel kind of guilty, but I didn’t say anything and just kept walking toward Bifrons.

“Modern-day disciple of Noah,” Setekh said. “Sir Bifrons was once known as

the most beautiful scion among the demons.”

“Oh?” I hadn’t known that. Now, he was just a grotesque tentacle monster. Not pretty at all.

“Yet, he has been reduced to this pitiful form,” lamented Setekh. “I had originally heard that he would be resurrected as he once was...by Archbishop Isaac. This outcome is far from what I expected...”

Oh, so this had blindsided Setekh too. He must have been fairly shocked...expecting to meet his old superior only to see this monster instead.

“Are you going to try and stop me from killing it?” Setekh seemed oddly placid, so I felt the need to ask him.

“This isn’t the Bifrons I knew... Besides, I can’t even touch you. Never have I felt more powerless than at this moment. I will at least watch over him until his last.”

I paused for a second, then replied, “I appreciate it.” If Setekh wanted to give up and stay out of the way, I wasn’t going to complain. Though, I still had no idea how I was going to actually take Bifrons out.

Makoto, there should be a core in the middle of that huge body. Eir is helping out with the dagger, so stab forward and destroy its body.

Was that really the only way? Destroying this writhing mass of tentacles? A dagger wouldn’t be able to penetrate deep enough to strike at the core of something this size...

I’ll have to attack from the inside.

I sighed. There was no better plan, and I was running out of time...

Hundreds of the tentacles tried to grab me as I approached, but they were all repelled by Noah’s armor before they even got close. Even so, they still surrounded the barrier. Was this really going to work?

“Y-You’re just walking on in?!” came Setekh’s flabbergasted demand. “I think even I would be eaten if he caught me... Then again, with Noah’s blessing... Hah, I could never measure up.”

Noah chortled. *Keep coming with the prai—no, we don’t have the time! Hurry!*

Oh, right. The time limit. Still, she was playing around...

“Okay, off we go!” Time to defeat the demon lord! I readied my dagger again.

“Noah’s disciple!” Setekh called out. “I doubt he is conscious anymore...but give Bifrons my regards, would you?”

I nodded slightly in response as I carried on through the tentacles. The massive monster opened up an equally massive mouth. It was utterly dark inside, like an entrance to hell.

Scary! *Calm Mind, Calm Mind.*

In we go.

I jumped into the abyss...and was swallowed by the darkness.

Nothing... I can’t see anything...

So *this* was the inside of a monster’s body... Up until now, I had (obviously) never been eaten by a monster. I’d expected it to be much more painful, but the divine armor meant I didn’t really feel anything.

The...ground...underfoot was soft and hard to walk on. Bifrons’s body coiled around me—the armor deflected it.

Well, let’s give this a try.

Sacrificial Magic: Offering.

I slashed at my surroundings as I channeled the wish to Eir, but nothing happened.

Mako, you need to find Bifrons’s body and stab it, she told me.

But it’s pitch black! I can’t see anything.

Just keep going straight ahead.

It’s not like I can even tell what “ahead” is.

Just let yourself get pulled along, Noah instructed.

I decided to trust Noah and carried along through the darkness. Something grumbled in the void, a groaning hatred. Was I still even in the same world? Or had I fallen to hell?

Suddenly, something appeared in front of me.

What the...?

Scenes suddenly sprung up around me, seeming almost hologram-like. Visions of war, of demons being persecuted. Young children were sold as slaves; images of corpses piled up around my feet. It was far from pleasant to look at.

It's probably some mental attack, I decided as I continued pressing forward. Most of the corpses vanished.

The scenes changed.

They now depicted a young boy. He was alone in class, doing nothing but playing games. He had no friends.

This was...me?

The image... It was me...as a child...

What in the world?

Was this pulled from my memories? It was true that, as a kid, I didn't do much other than game. I didn't particularly enjoy seeing it, but what was the point?

Noah? I heard Eir ask. *Isn't this that spell? That one that turns humans into husks of themselves after seconds of exposure?*

It is. Though it's pointless to use on Makoto.

Whoa! Eir exclaimed. *Mental influences really don't do anything to him.*

That wasn't something I could just ignore... A spell like that was a *huge* deal.

Don't worry about it, Noah told me.

She said that, but I couldn't help but fret. However, in time, the images of my past vanished, and the darkness closed in once more.

This was getting tiring. Also, Bifrons's body was way too big.

A short time later, I noticed that something white had appeared in the darkness. I slowly approached it.

It was a person. They had pale skin and snow-white hair. Their eyes were closed, apparently in sleep—or maybe death. Though their beauty was that of a

woman, their physique was definitely male.

This beautiful man was held aloft by countless black hands.

That's Bifrons, Noah said.

Take him out☆, Eir cheered happily.

That's easy for you to say... I didn't want to just attack some guy in his sleep.

But...if the demon lord came back, so many people would die... As a professional hero, I had to take him down.

Sorry, Setekh.

Sacrificial Magic: Offering.

I prayed to Eir and readied my dagger. Yet, just as I was about to thrust it into the man's chest, his eyes flicked open, and he caught my wrist.

Damn, he was awake. Was I too careless? I hurriedly pulled my dagger back and moved away.

The demon lord's open eyes were blank. His gaze was unfocused, and he didn't seem to be looking *at* anything. Apparently, Setekh was right in assuming that he'd lost himself.

His eyes roved around for a while, and then he spoke. "How long...has passed...since I fought Althena's hero? Why...is this my body?" His tone was inarticulate, and he probably wouldn't be much for discussion.

What to do?

As I was considering my options, his eyes met mine, and his expression changed.

"Why are *you* here?"

Huh?

He was clearly antagonistic toward me. Actually, *murderous* was probably more accurate. I could feel the pressure coming from him even through Noah's armor. Sweat trickled down my cheek. Our surroundings flared up with an ominous red glow.

Now that he was conscious, the mass of mana around us was now under the demon lord's control. In this space, he was the highest existence.

He's still got his sanity, Setekh... I thought.

His body was in tatters, though. It didn't seem like he had any of his four limbs left. Still, the menace pouring off him was palpable, and far beyond any other enemy I'd encountered.

"No...you aren't him... You can't be..."

I looked questioningly at Bifrons as his menace abated and his expression turned pensive. His terrifying looks now seemed more sad.

"Who are...you, human?"

"Um, the hero who's come to kill you..." I answered.

"The...hero?" he asked, seeming puzzled. "A hero... *He* wasn't a hero... Then...you are different people... Telling humans apart is...difficult..."

Hmm, maybe he *had* lost his mind? This wasn't a proper conversation.

"Human...who am I?"

What's with the tricky question?

"The demon lord...Bifrons...right?" I asked hesitantly.

"Bifrons... That *is* my name...but I am not...long for this world... The transmigration has...failed..." The demon lord stared distantly at me. His body, held up by the black hands, had no limbs and was gradually being eaten away. "Still...this is a pitiful...mimicry... He must...have tried to imitate Iblis's transmigration..."

"Oh, really?" I asked. Transmigration was way beyond anything I could understand.

What are you playing at?! Kill him!

Noah?

She's right, Mako. He's weak right now—use the power I gave you! Eir urged.

My time limit was thinning out. I needed to finish it now.

I held my dagger in both hands.

Eir, I off—

“You...are a wicked deity’s disciple, are you not...? Why are you borrowing strength from the Sacred Deities...?”

Instantly, he’d detected my allegiance to Noah, *and* Eir’s technique.

“How did you—?”

“It’s written...all over you. I fought alongside one of you before... If you wish to destroy me...you need not use that technique. I suppose the Sacred Deity tricked you? She must have...said you needed her technique to defeat a demon lord...?”

Noah and I both let out noises of surprise.

“Souls slain by that technique and offered up to a Sacred Deity...are reborn as loyal servants of the goddesses. Considering my long history as a demon lord...I would rather avoid such a fate... Besides...a wicked deity made that dagger of yours, along with that anima armor you are covered in. That...is more than enough to destroy me. You do not need Eir’s rite.”

Ach, I’m found out☆, Eir chirped. Apparently, Bifrons was telling the truth.

You knew but tricked us!

Of course I did☆ If I got a demon lord’s soul, I could make a really strong hero. Aww, there goes my chance to birth the strongest hero in Roses...

Damn, that’s cold... She was plotting all that?

You used my Makoto! accused Noah.

It’s your fault for not noticing.

Wait right there! I’m gonna beat the crap out of you.

Ahhhh!

Things were really noisy in my head. I turned back to the demon lord and quietly readied the blade. “You’re not...going to resist?” I asked.

The man’s expression was bored as he answered my question with another.

“Disciple...what is your goal?”

“To free Noah from the Seafloor Temple.” Though admittedly, I had plenty of other goals.

The demon lord offered a simple word of acknowledgment before explaining. “My mind is soon to fade...and when it does, I will be naught but a blighted beast. Destruction would be more pleasant... If you do so...you can take the magicite that forms the source of the Undead King’s power. You may use it as you wish... I do not want...to become a dog of the Sacred Deities.”

“Got it...” I answered after a pause. It seemed like I’d manage the mission one way or another. He was pretty understanding... I was honestly surprised that he was such a gentleman.

“Though, if you were one of *their* heroes...I’d fight to my last breath.” He grinned.

Yup, he was a scary one.

Oh, right, I need to pass the message on.

“Setekh sends his regards.”

“Setekh...? I remember that name... Oh, him?”

Good for you, Setekh, he remembered you!

“Still loyal despite working him so hard...the fool.”

“Hey, that’s...”

Right, time to kill him.

“Disciple. I have a message.”

“A message?” I asked warily.

“You were loyal. Show that loyalty to another great ally in the future. Tell...Setekh that.”

I could feel a faint amount of gratitude in his words.

“I’ll tell him when I see him.” If Setekh was still waiting, I would pass along the message.

“Do it... My mind is almost gone.”

“Got it.” I centered myself and gripped the dagger. Then, I took several steps forward—



—and thrust the dagger, covered in Noah’s anima, into the demon lord’s chest.

A massive blast of mana blew me back, and a chorus of damnable howling ripped through the air.

The demon lord’s body vanished.

A stone about the size of my fist rolled along the floor.

Hot!

The stone was pulsing, and not metaphorically either. This...was the demon lord’s magicite?

Humans call it a philosopher’s stone, Noah informed me.

Aww, I could have made him into such a powerful hero... muttered Eir.

This was...a philosopher’s stone. I’d heard that they sold for a fortune—enough money to live in luxury for generations.

It’s not like you’re struggling for money.

True. I didn’t have anything to use it for right now, though. I’d probably talk it over with Fujiyan.

Just then, sunlight splashed across my face, breaking through the darkness.

So bright...

The body was falling apart. Isaac’s reincarnation—failed and deformed—decayed around me until only the philosopher’s stone and I were left behind.

Noah, Eir, it’s over. I imagined they were still watching.

Well done, Makoto.

You’re so reliable, Mako!!!

They’d been a large part of this victory.

Just then, I felt someone’s eyes on me.

“Disciple? So it’s over...” Setekh had waited. He was definitely a loyal person. “Rest well, Bifrons,” he murmured, kneeling toward the empty space.

“He had a message.”

“You talked with him?” Setekh’s shoulders shuddered as he turned around.

“He said, ‘You were loyal. Show that loyalty to another great ally in the future.’”

Hearing my words, his voice began to shake. “I don’t deserve it. The praise is more than I earned...lowly as I am...”

Though I didn’t understand the context, it looked like I’d just told him something good. He *was* technically an enemy, though.

“So what are you doing now?” I asked him. “Are you going to fight me?”

“I would never! In fact...I would much rather be your ally!” Setekh declared.

“Noah’s not going to let me ally with demons...”

That’s right. Fuck demons!

Flipping the bird is obscene, Noah.

Apparently, she hadn’t forgiven or forgotten being tricked a thousand years ago. But...she’d been tricked by Eir just now. It struck me that she was perhaps a bit *too* easy to trick.

“Guh, Noah’s disciples are all zealots...” grumbled Setekh. “Cain was always saying ‘My goddess’s words are law!’”

Hmm, I’m not so sure about that. Her charm didn’t work on me, so I thought things between us were at least a *little* different.

“Then I shall wait until Noah changes her mi—” He suddenly cut himself off.

“What’s up?”

“U-Um...disciple. Ah...” His red eyes had gone wide and he was pointing at me.

“You’re turning to stone!”

“What?”

Damn, I was! It was getting harder to move!

“I thought you were immune?!” cried Setekh.

“Ah, the time limit ran out.” Noah’s armor had worn off.

“It’s going so fast! You’re a hero, so why aren’t you resistant? I didn’t manage to get you with a surprise attack like Springrogue’s hero.”

My resistance was a big fat zero. That’s why.

“Can you undo it?” I asked, figuring that it made sense to ask the person with the magic eyes.

I couldn’t move my legs anymore. So this was what petrification felt like...

“W-Wait a minute... I can activate the curse, but unraveling it...” As he spoke, he hurriedly wrapped a cloth over his eyes.

“You can’t control it?”

“Bifrons was always scolding me for it! My eyes turn everything I see to stone...friend or foe alike. That’s why I was always on my own...and why I was so happy to speak to Cain since it didn’t work on him.”

Oh, so that’s the reasoning. He’d been a loner before meeting up with Noah’s old disciple. Setekh was strong, but not really demon lord material.

I could hear footsteps getting closer.

“Makoto!”

“Takatsuki!”

“Mr. Boyfriend!”

Oh, they were all safe. They must have defeated the rest of the blight monsters.

“Rosalie’s on her way,” I told Setekh. She was a battle maniac, so she’d probably attack first, and ask questions later if she saw him.

“Gah! I can’t beat that witch! I wish we could have talked for longer...”

Setekh looked around with the cloth over his eyes, but surely, he couldn’t see...

“Before I go, tell me your name, disciple of Noah!”

“Oh, I never said?” Thinking back, I *hadn’t* introduced myself. Man, where

were my manners? “My name is Mak—”

That was when my mouth stopped moving. The curse was too quick.

No, your resistance is too low.

Damn...my stats are making life harder even now, huh?

“I-I’ll get your name next time!”

My mouth was stone now, so I couldn’t reply. His parting shot was kind of bizarre, but he did rush away right after. I could see Lucy and Sasa racing over. Neither of them looked particularly hurt.

Everyone was safe, then.

Man...I’m so...tired...

I could hear cracking noises inside myself. This must have been what petrification sounded like. It was kinda chilling.

Then...I lost consciousness.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Awakens

I stirred awake in my goddess's space.

"Hiii☆ Good job, Mako."

Eir was waving at me with a completely open smile.

"Thanks...Eir."

Why was she speaking to me before my own goddess? She had a conflicted look on her face, and she stood with her arms crossed.

"Makoto..."

Kneeling on the ground before her, I said, "I stopped the revival without getting hurt. Thank you for the armor spell."

However, her expression didn't clear.

"I'm sorry," she replied. "You were forced into fighting against a threat to Springrogue...and you even had to use your lifespan. You shouldn't have needed to go that far."

Maybe it was weighing on her mind.

"Well, it all turned out okay in the end," I assured her. "My friends are safe, and Lucy's home didn't take any losses. Although, I did get petrified... Am I gonna be okay?"

Surely it meant I was dead...right?

"It won't be a problem," she told me. "Furiae's lifting the curse from each of the fighters. The priests are helping, but as the Priestess of the Moon, she's on another level. In fact, she's already freed several dozen people."

Huh. It'd definitely been the right call to leave her behind. Seriously, though, Setekh. Don't you know the meaning of the word restraint?

My goddess, who was also in the room, spoke next. "On another note... *Eir*." Noah's neck pivoted so she could glare at the other deity.

“Oh, little old me?”

“Use your own hero already,” Noah complained, advancing on Eir. “You just keep pushing everything onto Makoto!”

“W-Weeeeelll. I mean, I feel bad, but there *are* reasons...”

I quickly butted into the conversation before it could devolve further than Eir guiltily avoiding Noah’s gaze. “I had fun, so I don’t really mind.”

Both of them uttered noises of confusion and turned to me.

“F-Fun, Mako?”

“You’re incorrigible...”

I’d gotten to meet Springrogue’s hero and see Lucy’s mother absolutely wrecking shit up close. On top of that, I’d even spoken to the demon lord. Definitely a worthwhile adventure.

“Noah,” Eir said after a moment. “Mako’s a bit weird, isn’t he?”

“He’s got no sense of danger. What kind of deviant’s *happy* about meeting a demon lord?”

Hey, I didn’t put in all that work just to be called a deviant!

I decided to ignore her comment, and instead, I recalled the conversation with Bifrons. “Eir, you reincarnated that soul I offered you, right?” I asked. Creatures sacrificed to the gods through that “offering” technique were reincarnated by the Sacred Deities.

“Right!” Eir cheered cutely. “A strong demon makes a strong warrior☆ You can’t go wasting that. Sciulli’s now a wonderful hero.”

I sighed. “Well, I can appreciate Roses getting stronger out of the deal...”

Frankly, *me* being their strongest fighter put Roses in a pretty bad position. Did that mean Sciulli would end up as a colleague of mine in the future?

“Anyway, can a soul actually be purified so quickly between two extreme alignments?” Noah wondered.

Soul purification? How did that work?

“What do you mean, Noah?” I asked.

“Well, demon souls are stained with ‘unholy’ protection. Converting that into a hero’s soul with *holy* protection would probably lead to some instability.”

That’s my goddess, all right. She knows everything.

“Usually, souls are purified gradually...” she continued. “Making the change so quickly means the resulting hero will probably go mad fairly quickly.”

“What?” *That* hadn’t been what I’d expected to hear.

I looked at Eir in shock. She was smiling happily. “Hmm, well...” she remarked casually. “It is pretty likely.”

“That’s in poor taste,” said Noah.

“It’s not like there’s much of a choice. We don’t have a ton of fighting power... We’ve only got like a fifty percent chance of winning against the demons.”

Wha?

“Don’t be an idiot. You can’t leak the future in front of Makoto.”

“Don’t worry about it. Your barrier means the Sacred Deities can’t peep down here.” Eir let out a giggle. “It’s perfect for secret conversations.”

The revelations just hadn’t stopped coming. But, there was one thing that stuck out in my mind more than anything else.

“Eir, the other races are pretty likely to lose against the demons?” I asked.

“Yup. At least, according to Ira. The future isn’t fixed, though, so who knows what’ll happen.”

“That’s why you’re getting fighters ready...in case the war’s lost,” Noah concluded. “But, making powerful heroes now... There still isn’t enough time.”

“So, Mako, make sure you keep offering up strong demons☆ That way we can at least launch a counterattack if we lose. I can probably manage five or so usable heroes in time, but the rest’ll go mad and die.”

I was lost for words. Eir was blackhearted! Hell, *she* was closer to being the wicked deity than Noah.

“Sh-Should you really be treating lives so lightly?” It probably counted as disrespectful, but I felt my voice taking on an almost censuring tone.

Eir’s expression didn’t change. She wore an easygoing smile as she answered quietly, “It’s fine. After all, we rule this world.”

Her eyes were affectionate as she spoke—affectionate chips of ice. Her smile was how you might watch ants marching across the ground. That was the difference between humans and gods—it was a vast, impassable gulf between us.

“Tch...” Noah tutted, crossing her arms and scowling. “Makoto, you should wash your hands of Roses. After all, you’re only a State-Authorized Hero, so you can just run off.”

“Well, it’s not like I have anywhere else to go.” Strictly speaking, I could head for Highland and Sakurai, but the class divide was a bit much for me.

“Where’d you get that idea?” Noah demanded. “You just saved Springrogue. Freya, Maximilian, and Rosalie are all going to be on your side. You and the others should move there. You can break it off with Eir’s priestess at the same time.”

Noah was flitting from topic to topic... But besides that, wasn’t she the one that had told me to get close to Sophia in the first place?

“H-Hey, you can’t do that! Sophie’ll be beside herself!” Eir exclaimed, flustered and suddenly panicking.

“Hah! That’s what you get for using my Makoto!”

“M-Mako! I’ll work in good faith with you from now on, so at least don’t drop the betrothal...if that would be acceptable...”

She’d gone *that* far in the other direction...?! I scratched at my cheek and thought it over. *The betrothal’s only a verbal agreement so far. Don’t I need to sign something...?*

“I’ll keep working as a hero...and as for Princess Sophia—” I was about to say that the relationship wouldn’t change, but I suddenly stopped.

Eir seemed kind at first, but she has this wicked side too... Could her priestess

be the same way?

“Wait, Mako! You’ve got it all wrong! Sophie’s *actually* pure, unlike me!”

Ah, she was reading my mind again. Also, she’d definitely said, “unlike me.”

“She’s not *my* disciple, so I can’t say for sure...but she’s probably fine,” Noah said. “Disciples don’t necessarily follow their goddesses in terms of poor personality. Eir’s facade is so perfect that even her followers are taken in.”

Eir gave a pout. “That’s mean. Makoto, you know she prays to me every night about you, right? She’s super cute, so you look after her, you hear?”

“Should you really be telling me that...?” I didn’t know how I’d look Sophia in the eyes the next time we met.

“I’ll keep supporting you behind the scenes. ‘Kay?! I’m the goddess of water after all! We fit perfectly together.”

“Just don’t lie so much,” I told her. Not that I’d be able to really trust Eir again. Though, I suppose Noah had hidden her status as a wicked deity at first...so she’s just the same!

“Makoto?!” I ignored Noah’s searching look.

Suddenly, my vision began to blur, and I heard Eir say, “Oh. Furiae’s broken the curse on you. You should be waking up pretty soon.”

“Oh. I wanted to talk for a bit longer.” Particularly about the war. The heroes would be fighting no matter what, and I...wasn’t entirely happy battling in a war we’d probably lose.

My sight of the two goddesses got hazier as I considered that. I was almost awake.

“Oh! Freya’s message!” Eir exclaimed, though I only faintly heard it. “She said thanks and that she’s grateful!”

My vision then went black, and I passed out.



Something was scraping my face. I cracked my eyes open and saw Twi licking me. After a moment of orienting myself, I murmured, “Morning, Twi.”

I must've worried her.

"Oh, Mr. Statue Hero, you're awake?"

No sooner had I opened my eyes than I was greeted by a gorgeous voice regaling me with decidedly less gorgeous sentiments. It belonged to a woman with glossy black hair, almost silken white skin, and the looks of a refined noble. Furiae.

"Princess... Good morning."

"It took minutes to fix the elves and knights, but a whole week for you," she complained, giving me a light slap. "Do you not understand what *zero* resistance means?"

"I can't help it. My level goes up, but my stats don't at all." I tried to sit up and noticed that my body felt like lead. It was similar to when I'd had a cold and a 39-degree fever.

Wh-Wha?

"Just lie back. You're not fully healed yet." She pushed me down onto something soft.

Um? Actually, considering that she's looking at me from above and to the side... The position we're in...

I used *RPG Player's* altered perspective to check and saw...that my head was in her lap.

Th-This is kinda embarrassing...

"Nah, I feel fine," I insisted, heaving myself up.

"Oh, are you feeling shy, my knight? Well, I suppose anyone would be, seeing the most beautiful face in the world. Hurry up and fall for the charm," she teased.

Most beautiful in the world, huh...

I cast my thoughts back to the two goddesses I'd just dreamed of. They were visions of beauty beyond humanity. *Hmm, if you set them side by side with humans...* Honestly, even Furiae seemed plain in comparison.

“What’s with that face?” she asked suspiciously.

“Just thinking that you always look beautiful,” I replied flatly.

“Hey! I don’t like your tone there!” She smacked me again, and Twi raced off somewhere as she raised her voice. “That sympathetic look is annoying me!”

“Ow! Hold on! Ouch! That hurts!” Considering my stats and the fact that she was a priestess (the pinnacle of humanity), those punches were painful!

She didn’t stop, though. “You’re not getting away with it! You took the mage and warrior but left me—and *only* me—behind. And *then* you had the gall to come back as a statue!”

“Well, you were worried, right? Thanks, Princess.”

“Shut up! Quiet! I’m coming with you next time!”

“Nah, that ain’t happening.” I could hardly take a priestess onto the battlefield.

I do feel bad for worrying her, though.

She kept hitting me, and I did my best to calm her down. At that moment, I made a promise to myself that I’d be less reckless from now on.

I’d also just woken up, so my mind wasn’t totally sharp yet. That was why I didn’t notice another person approaching.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, Hero Makoto,” Princess Sophia stated, looking coldly down at me.



“What?” I asked in confusion. My head was currently in Furiae’s lap, and she was smacking me...which must have looked like I was having a fling with another girl right in front of my fiancée.

Unlike me, Furiae was as quick as lightning. The moment she saw the princess, she said, “I’ll leave you two be,” and then bolted, just like a cat.

And thus, Princess Sophia and I were left alone.

“You seem awfully close with that priestess,” she said.

“Uh, well...I guess?” What was going on? Her expression was the same as ever, but there was a chill running down my spine as a cold sweat gathered on my forehead.

“That reminds me—apparently, the third daughter of the Ballantine family wishes to wed Hero Makoto of Roses,” she intoned, her voice sterile. “How strange. I was under the impression that she rather disliked you.”

“Wah?” The *third* daughter? *Janet*? “Oh, right. I actually haven’t seen Janet...” In fact, *none* of the Pegasus Knights seemed to be around anymore.

“She has returned to Highland to report on the near revival of a demon lord in Springrogue.”

“Haaahh...I see.” There definitely was a lot to report concerning the Snake Sect and Zagan’s indirect involvement. Still, she must’ve really raced off. She could have at least said goodbye...

“Hero Makoto, I have a message from Janet Ballantine for you,” the princess told me.

“A message?” Oh, so she *did* say goodbye.

“The...woman...had the gall to leave word that she would train to fight alongside you during the Northern Front Plan. She also said that the next time you meet...she’d like to have a meal alone with you.”

Sophia’s anger was palpable when reciting the latter half of that message. If I remembered correctly, the Ballantine family was on about the same class level as the royal families of some countries...including Roses.

“I’ve taken my eyes off my fiancé for such a short period...and girls are falling over themselves for you.”

“Um...that’s not true,” I protested awkwardly. She placed her hand on my cheek, and it was terrifyingly cold. Was it due to her ice magic? We just looked at each other for a while.

But then, her expression smoothed out, and her hand warmed on my skin. “Well, no matter. At least you are safe. I was shocked to learn that you had been petrified...” She paused for a moment, and her tone turned more sympathetic. “Well done. Your only duty in Springrogue was to bring my regards to the hero and priestess of this country, and yet, you defeated a demon lord...”

“Yeah,” I said. “A lot happened... A lot more than I expected.”

Suddenly a large person lumbered through the door. “Oh! Hero Makoto! You’re awake. I’m glad you’re safe!” Maximilian’s voice was as loud in the quiet room.

“Glad you’re safe too,” I replied. The last time I’d seen him was after he’d turned to stone. He’d apparently been freed safely.

“That was truly embarrassing... I spent the period of greatest peril as nothing but a statue,” he complained, clenching a fist in shame. “Once you’re recovered, I’d love to train with you! I’d love to test myself against someone of your stature!”

I let out a confused noise as I looked at the dragonoid’s towering figure. With my stats, he’d send me flying with a flick.

Maximilian didn’t say anything more, just wandered off with a merry laugh.

“You appear to have made ties with the hero of Springrogue as well,” Princess Sophia remarked seriously.

“Well, we fought together against the demon lord.”

Right, the whole point was to meet him. I’d forgotten. Well! Mission accomplished.

“Oh, you’re awake!” exclaimed an elf woman. She rushed into the room and suddenly grabbed my hand. “Lucy was worried. You’ve been sleeping for the

past week!”

Right, this was Freya’s priestess...I think. Her name was...

“Sorry for worrying you, Florna.”

“Thank goodness...my pitiful curse breaking was no help at all. That Fuuri you brought along was incredible.”

“Well...yeah...” After all, Furiae was an *expert*.

Also, Florna was holding my hand tightly...and Sophia’s expression was getting scary.

“I’ll go call Lucy and Aya. They were both worried as well.” Florna turned to leave, giving the princess a casual wave. “Farewell, Lady Sophia.”

There was silence for a moment in her wake, and then, almost inaudibly, Princess Sophia muttered, “Womanizer...”

“Just so you know, she’s engaged and is Lucy’s sister-in-law,” I pointed out.

“Hmph.”

Apparently, that wasn’t the problem. I guess Sophia wasn’t going to be in a good mood for a while. As a State-Authorized Hero, it would probably serve me well to make sure my boss was happy.

I was thinking about what to say when a blonde elf appeared—literally out of thin air—and wrapped her arms around me.

“Yay! Mr. Boyfriend!”

“Wah?!” I managed to blurt before getting my bearings a bit. “R-Rosalie?!”

“The Crimson Witch?”

My statement prompted a surprised question from the princess. Had Sophia not met Rosalie yet?

“Ah, it’s none other than the hero of the hour who triumphed against the demon lord! You’re finally awake!” Rosalie cheered. “Hm? Who’s this prickly-looking beauty next to you? Is this an affair? I can’t approve of that.”

“Morning, Rosalie,” I said, finally greeting the teleporting woman properly.

“Are you OK? Setekh’s curse was lifted?” Last time I saw her, one of her arms had been petrified.

Rosalie broke down into guffaws. “No worries, no worries! I forced it off.”

“You healed it by yourself?!” Seriously, what was this woman?

Princess Sophia, on the other hand, couldn’t get a full sentence out through her panic. “U-Umm, I-I am—”

“Hmm, you go for noble-looking girls like this? Lucy’s more down to earth like me. She’ll be just as wild in bed, though.”

“Can you get your mind out of the gutter until I’ve woken up at least?” I griped. *Also, that’s your daughter you’re talking about.*

She laughed again. “So, what gets you going? These girls all look diligent, but you know what they say: it’s always the quiet ones.”

“What?!” the princess demanded angrily.

Man, this was going to end up as a diplomatic incident...

“This is Princess Sophia of Roses,” I said.

“Guh?!” Rosalie suddenly put both hands in the air and jolted away from me. “Awawawa! Royalty?! Seriously?! Am I gonna end up on the chopping block?!”

“Sophia, you planning on executing her?” I asked.

“H-How could I?! She’s a hero of Springrogue!”

“There you go,” I told Rosalie.

“For real? Well, I’ll stop third-wheeling then. Make sure you show me that dagger some time—I want to see the Godslayer!”

And just like that, once Rosalie had finished her sentence, she teleported away.

Sophia and I fell silent.

That woman really was like a storm...

I glanced over at the princess to find her staring fixedly at me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You... You really built relationships with the movers and shakers in this country... My previous messengers didn’t manage anything...” Her expression darkened considerably.

“Ah, well, they’re all involved with Lucy,” I explained. Heroes and priestesses sounded like lofty titles...but the ones in Springrogue were Lucy’s classmate, sister-in-law, and mother. Honestly, bringing Lucy along had been a cheat code.

Sophia let out a sigh before looking back at me. “Hero Makoto.”

“Y-Yes?” I asked.

“You have been summoned by the king of Highland.”

“What?” Highland *again*? I’d only just left the place.

“Why do you look so confused? You *did* defeat the demon lord, didn’t you?”

“Uh... Yes, I did.” Well, kinda. I’d had a conversation with the demon in question when he could already feel himself fading away... I guess that counted. The Bifrons I’d beaten had already been weakened by Rosalie beforehand, and had mostly been defeated through Eir’s technique anyway.

What had I actually done?

“Rosalie was the one to pull the most weight,” I asserted.

“Was she? By her words, you were the most helpful, and all the credit should go to you...at least, that’s what the village chief told me.”

I fell silent.

Rosalie! You’re just foisting off the annoying crap onto me! Where’d she go? I’m going to give her a piece of my mind!

“However,” Sophia continued, “Princess Noel has sent a secret messenger. She says that it would be best for you not to come.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, confused. The king was her father, so why would she try to stop his summons?

“It’s simple,” the princess offered dully. “The Highland nobility has certainly been working on the royal family. They wish to greet a hero capable of defeating a demon lord...and to join that hero to their own families. I wager

that if you go to Highland, you won't be able to leave again. You'll have your pick of the nobility as wives and concubines. Good for you."

Wait, seriously? Was I being put on the same route as Sakurai? With twenty wives?

"What will you do?" she asked with upturned eyes.

Suddenly, an *RPG Player* choice flashed in my mind.

Will you take the harem end in Highland?

Yes

►No

Phrasing! My skill was bullying me!

"I'm not going to Highland," I told her. That made her eyes widen in surprise.

"If you marry into the Highland royal or noble families...your life will be made," Sophia pointed out. "They aren't a weak country like Roses. They're the strongest on the continent."

Yeah, but still...

I remembered the discussion with Noah and Eir. Our chances of winning this war were perilously low.

This ain't the time to be playing around with the nobility. I have to train.

"I'll deal with all that stuff after we defeat Iblis," I declared. "We need to make Roses stronger first. According to Eir, we need another ten heroes."

"What?!" Sophia exclaimed. "We can't get heroes that easily! Also...according to Eir? What are you—"

The sudden change in topic had made the princess lose her composure entirely.

"We need to consider strategies for if we lose," I continued. "We should also make sure the forts are maintained as refuges."

“Wait, prepare for losing? The goddesses would be shocked to hear that!”

As a matter of fact...I’d heard about our potential loss from a goddess. How much was Eir keeping from her priestess? Was it because the truth would unnerve Sophia?

Also, does Sakurai know about this future? He had a blessing from Althena, the daughter of the pantheon head. He should be fine even against Iblis, I’d thought. However, the conversation with Eir had made me much more nervous.

“Sophia, I need to ask you to pass something along to Princess Noelle.”

“Just...wait a moment,” she said, sounding utterly bewildered. “I haven’t been following this conversation...”

But then, our discussion was derailed by Lucy and Sasa calling my name. They both leaped into the room and wrapped their arms around me. The force of their affection sent me flying back down onto the bed.

“Are you okay now?” Lucy said through teary eyes. “The curse wouldn’t dissipate, even after all that time...”

“I was so worried,” Sasa murmured through her own tears. Neither of them showed any sign of backing off. Their hands were shaking.

Well...I was petrified for a whole week. It was hardly a surprise that they’d been fretting.

“Sorry I made you both worry,” I apologized.

“We’re just glad you’re okay,” Sasa said. “Right, Lu?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right. Can you move now?”

“Mhm, though my body still feels heavy.” I thought that I should be able to walk at least. However, the next thing they had to say was way beyond what I expected...

“See! Go on, Lu! Go for it!” Sasa cheered.

“What?! I’m the one saying it?” Lucy complained. “Urgh... All right, Makoto. Heroing is a pretty dangerous job, right? And you don’t know when you might die...? And, uh...considering what happened this time, uh...” she was fidgeting

as she spoke, and eventually, she moved next to my ear to whisper the last sentence. “S-So can we act more like lovers?”

A shudder ran down my back, and I felt my body temperature shoot up.

“You’re bright red, Takatsuki,” Sasa remarked.

“S-Sasa?”

Before I knew it, her face was right next to mine. *Wait, wait! Something’s strange here.* It was happening so fast...

There must have been someone pulling the strings.

I looked around, activated my *Listen* skill, and then I heard Rosalie’s voice urging them on. Seriously?! What was with her?

“Womanizer,” Sophia muttered once again.

What?! Crap! The princess is still right next to me!

“You shouldn’t worry your companions so much,” Sophia said with a slightly sulky look. Her voice sounded like she was chiding a child.

She...wasn’t angry?

“Hey, *you* didn’t leave his side for the past three days,” Sasa pointed out.

“Yeah, the princess had knights stationed around the clock until he woke up,” Lucy said.

“H-Hey!” Sophia sputtered. “You said you wouldn’t tell him!”

“Alas, if only I could have been with you, Hero Makoto...” Sasa quoted.

Was that supposed to be an imitation of the princess?

“S-Stop that at once!” Sophia demanded, grabbing Sasa’s shoulder and shaking her.

At her touch, Sasa yelped and started to shiver.

“Princess! Your ice magic!” Lucy exclaimed, panicking. Lamiae couldn’t deal with low temperatures at all, and apparently, Princess Sophia was being a bit lax with her mana.

I watched the three girls giggling for a while, and then Furiae returned with

Two on her shoulder.

“What’re you all doing?” she asked. Maybe she’d heard the commotion and felt left out.

Phew, everyone’s safe.

It had been really hard, but we’d all overcome the danger. I leaned back, still groggy, and closed my eyes. *Another nap sounds perfect*, I decided, letting my friends’ voices lull me to sleep.

And thus, my adventure in Springrogue came to an end.

Epilogue: Traveling with a Witch

In front of me, there was a massive hole the size of a lake. It descended into darkness, and I couldn't see the bottom. Just peering down filled me with the sense that I was being dragged inside.

"So this is Tartarus...said to connect to the underworld..." I murmured.

"It's one of the *last dungeons*, unknown to mankind..." Lucy replied.

As for why we were here... The story began several hours ago.

Every time I staggered up to go train, Sasa and Princess Sophia sent me back to bed for more rest. I was under observation to stop me from sneaking away.

Damn it. I'm tired of lying in bed.

Lucy seemed like she'd be easier to convince than Sasa or Princess Sophia, so I tried pleading my case. "Come on, Lucy, I'm fine now. I just want to go outside."

"Hmm, I'd like to let you, but the doctor says you still need to rest."

"I'll be with you. We can go together."

"Aww, but Aya'll be mad... If you have to, though..."

Great, it was working! I just needed to keep up the pressure.

"Oh, you two," Rosalie said, suddenly appearing from nowhere. "You're heading out? I'll play transport."

Lucy and I barely had time to utter a noise before our field of vision changed.

Before us was a world of blue and white. Lucy and I had been released...in the sky...more than a kilometer above the ground.

We both started screaming.

"What's with the yelling?" Rosalie asked, her voice calm like she was just taking a stroll. "Oh, can neither of you fly?"

“We can’t!” I yelled.

“Do something, mama!”

“Such needy children,” Rosalie said. The next moment, we were enveloped in light, and we started to float in the air.

“What are you doing?!” Lucy demanded.

“Well, I thought I was doing you both a favor.”

“You didn’t wait!”

I was watching the parent and child argument when I remembered that Rosalie was a master of teleportation. “Rosalie? How far can you go with your *Teleport*?” I asked.

“Hm? Is there somewhere you want to go?”

“Well, I haven’t seen any of the other continents in this world.”

“So you want to see the sights? Okay! A wonderful excursion for an adventurer, coming right up☆!” She grinned, grabbing our arms. “Time for a secret tour!”

Lucy and I both yelped, and then, we found ourselves in front of Tartarus.

“Brr!” I quickly put up a barrier against the cold. Where were we?!

“Mama! This is the north pole!”

Tartarus was at the northernmost point on the northern continent. In other words, it was damn freezing. Discounting that, though, it was an incredible sight. A fissure had lanced through the ice, so wide that it was impossible to see the other side. What on earth was down there...?

“It’s a last dungeon, so no one’s ever completely explored it. Want to give it a go?” Rosalie smiled at me. “Apparently, if you clear the deepest floor, you can get some serious power! Like, the god of the dead can grant you the ability to bring people back to life!”

Right—this was a dungeon where you could have people raised from the dead. It was also a place with no end of challengers, despite its location at the pole. The entrance was huge, so we couldn’t see any other adventurers...but

they were almost certainly here.

“Have you ever tried?” I asked Rosalie.

“Of course. I got as far as the fourth floor, but you can’t live and go to the fifth floor.”

“What? Then how do you get past that?”

“Well, you die, of course,” she said casually.

What the hell? I suppose...if you manage to clear the fifth floor, you get to come back to life...?

Hell, that was a one-way trip. What a crazy dungeon. Either way, even the fourth floor of this last dungeon was beyond my abilities. Though, I kinda wanted to take a look at the first floor.

“Look! Something’s there!” Lucy exclaimed, pointing at the cliffs. I peered over there with *Clairvoyance* and saw a huge snakelike monster writhing around.

“What is it?”

“Ah, that’s a shadow dragon. The first floor is their nest,” Rosalie explained.

“So it’s a dragon lair...?” It was just like Labyrinthos’s final floor...except this was the first one.

Yeeeah... I can’t do that...

“Why don’t we just look from here and call it a day?” I suggested.

“Oh, really? To the next stop, then!” Rosalie cheered.

“The next?” Lucy and I asked in unison, but we didn’t have time to stop her before the scenery in front of us changed again.

“Here we are—the last dungeon, Babel, and the dungeon town, Carafe!”

Lucy and I both let out impressed noises at the sight in front of us.

The first thing we saw was the tower—known as Babel or Celestial Tower. It was a huge building jutting up from the center of the town; it seemed to be holding the very skies up, and its top was obscured by clouds.

“This is Carafe...the number one adventurer town...” Lucy murmured, and I immediately understood the gravity of her words. “It’s a town built around one of the last dungeons... The merchants are here for its treasure.”

Carafe was a place Fujiyan had mentioned wanting to visit several times. I never thought I’d get here first...

Aside from the impressive dungeon, the town itself was interesting as well. It wasn’t like the towns in any other country I’d visited before. The stalls were lined with magic items I’d never encountered, along with powerful weapons. They’d probably all been found in the dungeon.

The people of Carafe were made up of all races, and each individual seemed visibly strong. Seeing that, I could understand why it was known as the number one adventurer town.

As we observed Carafe, Rosalie continued the explanation. “Technically, they aren’t adventurers, but *investigators*. The dungeon is managed, so you need to apply for permission to explore it. Although...my *Teleport* means I can skip all the formalities.”

“Come on, Rosie, that’s illegal.”

“Hm?” was Rosalie’s only reaction. Lucy and I started in shock.

A huge man had turned up right behind us.

Could he teleport as well? No one had been there a moment ago... He had sharp eyes and a robust beard that made him look almost like a lion.

“Oh, if it isn’t Uther!” exclaimed Rosalie. “Can you afford to waste time here?”

“Well, a mage with ridiculous mana reserves teleported into my town, so why wouldn’t I come running?”

“Welp...guess we were discovered by the law,” Rosalie said sheepishly. “Sorry, guys, we’re not going in the dungeon today.”

I hadn’t been intending to break the law anyway. Honestly, I was more interested in the man before us.

“Um...mama. You called him Uther...”

“Oh, so this lovely lady is your daughter?” asked the man. “Nice to meet you. I am Uther Mercurius Pendragon. I’m in charge of this town.”

He was pretty informal about it, but that meant—

“King Uther of the Dungeon Town...”

—the man in front of me was a king.

“I am not fond of that kind of title, boy. I’m an investigator at heart.”

“Well...I’ve read your *World of Adventure* so many times,” I told him. It’d been one of my favorite books when I’d been making my way through the literature in the Water Temple. But...I never thought I’d meet the legendary adventurer Uther here.

“Oh! You like my book? That’s good to hear. May I have your name?” he asked.

“M-Makoto Takatsuki,” I answered nervously.

“An otherworlder’s name if I ever heard one. Interesting. Please, I would like to invite you to my home for some tea. Naturally, there will be accompanying snacks of the finest make.”

“No, no, no,” Rosalie refused. “This is their date! No third-wheeling!”

“I would say that having the girl’s mother along on a date is the biggest example of a third wheel,” Uther said in exasperation. He then shrugged, and a magic circle spread out beneath his feet. “There is much to see in the town. Enjoy yourselves. Just please refrain from breaking the law.”

With that, the man vanished.

Lucy and I let out sighs.

“What’s up?” Rosalie asked us. She obviously didn’t understand how we felt.

“Mama...you know the king of the number one adventurer town in the world?”

“Isn’t he a legend?” I pressed.

Rosalie was a bit legendary herself—she had killed a demon lord after all. However, the impression she usually gave off was more average, and when I

spoke to her, it mostly felt like talking to Lucy's mother rather than a renowned witch.

She was incredible, though... Even when warned against lawbreaking by the king himself, she seemed unruffled. Whew.

"Anyway, now that he knows we're here, there'll be no sneaking in. The prize for clearing Babel is famous, so you probably both know about it, right?"

"Eternal life," I recited, "and..."

"Access to the realm of the gods," Lucy finished.

The dream of all mankind. Babel was the most popular dungeon in the world. It was right in the middle of the southern continent as well, so it was well-placed for travel.

"It's a stupid-long dungeon though—a thousand floors! You need to be ready," asserted Rosalie.

"A thousand..."

"That's ridiculous..."

Naturally, mankind had yet to succeed. Lucy and I exchanged looks. This dungeon was also crazy, albeit in a different way than Tartarus.

"Let's move on to the next one," Rosalie declared.

My heart pounded at that. There were three dungeons known as the last dungeons in this world. Having *three* despite them each being called the *last* was a bit odd...but whatever.

These dungeons were Tartarus, Babel, and the Seafloor Temple.

"Next is the Seafloor Temple, right?!"

Rosalie's expression soured at my excitement. "You...want to go?"

"Oh, aren't we?"

Her expression said she wasn't feeling it.

"He's aiming to get there, mama."

"Ah... Why?" she asked curiously.

“Well, don’t all adventurers want to beat the last dungeons?” I deflected. I wanted to hide anything about Noah since she was a wicked deity.

“Well, true... But the Seafloor Temple is on another level. It isn’t a massive dungeon in itself, but the protector is a bit much...”

Rosalie’s words brought up vivid memories of my previous attempts. “Leviathan, the divine beast...” I murmured. “On top of that, you can’t use elementals around the temple...”

“Oh?” Rosalie’s voice was curious. “How do you know about the barrier? Wait...don’t tell me...”

“He made the attempt before and saw Leviathan.”

Rosalie’s eyes widened. “What?! But you’ve only been in this world for a few years! You’ve already faced a last dungeon *and* Leviathan?!”

“Not that I managed anything...” I replied dully. For some reason, she smiled widely.

“Not bad! You’re loopy!” she exclaimed, grabbing my hand between both of hers.

I sighed.

“I’ve been looking for a companion after all the solo traveling,” she continued. “What do you say—I’ll give you a hand if you want to clear the last dungeon.”

I could have the Crimson Witch by my side? Why wouldn’t I accept that? Just as I was about to do so, a selection screen appeared in front of me.

Will you enter the Rosalie Route?

Yes

No

And just what’s that supposed to mean, Mr. RPG Player?

“Don’t you dare steal him!” Lucy protested. “Don’t fall for it, Makoto!”

I don’t think that’s what she meant, Lucy...

“One time wouldn’t hurt. You must be tired of all the young girls, right? A more *experienced* woman...someone a bit older than you... Well, from time to time, it makes for a nice change.”

I retract my previous remark. That’s exactly what she was aiming for.

“‘A bit older’ indeed!” chastised Lucy. “You’re two hundr—”

“I said no talking about my age!”

Should I try and stop the headlock?

“Ahhh! Stop, mama! That hurts!”

Well, they looked like they were having fun, and interfering with family time was rude.

After they’d squabbled for a while, Rosalie turned back to me. “Okay, joking aside...”

“Uh, I think...you were at least half serious,” Lucy complained, staggering back over to me now that her mother had released her.

“The Seafloor Temple’s underwater, and Lucy’s no good with water magic, so going there right now isn’t ideal,” said Rosalie. “I’ll take you two somewhere else instead.”

Grabbing our hands, Rosalie teleported once more.

“Where...” I muttered, glancing around. The area was covered in green as far as I could see. At first, I thought the color came from the trees, but looking down revealed an uneven wooden floor. However, a blue, cloudless sky stretched out over our heads, so we weren’t inside.

“The sky feels so close... Mama, where are we?”

Lucy was right—the sun seemed significantly closer than normal, and the air felt thin.

Rosalie chuckled. “This is the floating continent. That thing in the middle is the world tree!”

“The floating continent?!”

“The world tree?!”

The four continents of the world were surrounded by a middlesea that stretched out to the north, east, south, and west. However, I'd heard that there was a continent floating above that ocean as well. The other countries barely traded there, and the people living on the floating continent were almost isolated...

"The world tree..." Lucy said nervously. "That's supposed to be a holy site for the people living here... Maybe we shouldn't just go walking in." Her uneasy voice made me nervous as well.

We'd literally just been scolded by the king in the dungeon town. Rosalie seemed all too willing to ignore immigration control.

"There's a village on the world tree—it's up this way. The place is really interesting, so I'll show you the way." Despite her daughter's hesitancy, Rosalie was as unconcerned as ever. Lucy and I exchanged glances, but since we didn't want to get left behind, we hurried after her.

The floor was practically made of rolling trees. At first, I'd thought it was made of plain wood...but it was actually comprised of massive branches. How damn big was this tree?

"You're not finding it hard to walk?" I asked Lucy.

"I'm fine. I grew up in the Great Forest, so I'm used to this. What about you?"

"I'll manage," I replied. The surface was completely different from walking on solid ground, and I was being careful not to fall.

I followed after the two elves, albeit more slowly.

"There, we can see it now! That's Torys Village—the village atop the world tree."

In the direction she was pointing, I spied a small settlement that was about half the size of Canaan. The houses were made in a similar style to those in the elf village. They looked kind of plain at a glance, but the people were certainly unique. In fact, they had wings growing from their backs.

"Makoto, look!"

"They're angels," I said, while Lucy simultaneously declared, "Avians!"

We stared at each other. Apparently, one of us was wrong.

One of them seemed to notice our voices and turned toward us. The person's expression turned to shock, and they flew over.

"Rosalie! You came to visit!"

"Yup, I sure did!"

The two apparently knew each other, and the first winged person was soon joined by more. All of them were women.

Makoto, these are avians, Noah explained. Their race lives only on the floating continent.

So they weren't angels...

Angels are just spiritual and holy, Noah clarified. They don't have bodies. Avians are completely different.

I hadn't studied enough... It seemed that I didn't know much about the world outside of the western continent.

"Who are these two?" one of the avians asked, looking at Lucy and me.

"My daughter and son-in-law."

"Oh my! Your family? We need to make them feel welcome!"

Out of nowhere, we found ourselves in the middle of a party. Interestingly, all the avians present seemed to be women.

How do they have kids? I wondered, but there was no way I'd bring that up around people I'd just met. Rosalie could tell me later...

Speaking of Rosalie, she was happily drinking away with the villagers. Lucy and I awkwardly listened in.

Apparently, Rosalie had once saved the avians—she'd happened to drop in during an attack by a calamity level monster. The beast could have spelled the end of the village, but she'd repelled it, earning the avians' gratitude.

No outsiders were usually allowed here, but Rosalie's presence seemed to be an automatic pass.

So, yeah! This also wasn't somewhere that we should just wander into!

Lucy and I had turned apologetic at that point, but the avians had smiled and said that any family of Rosalie was welcome. She seemed to have well and truly earned their trust.

However, the most interesting thing we heard was that this village had been the birthplace of Anna the Holy Mother. She'd been Abel the Savior's comrade and lover, on top of being Highland's first king and pope. And, in the middle of this village, there was apparently a statue of her alongside Althena.

According to the avians, it was a symbol of the village's peace. Had Anna the Holy Mother been an avian? She'd had wings? I hadn't heard anything like that before now...

As the party continued, an avian girl turned and whispered to Lucy and me. "This is just between us..."

According to her, there was a nice clearing past the rear gate of the village where you could see the entire continent. *Also* according to her, vows between lovers that were spoken there would last forever.

"It's even where Abel the Savior and Anna the Holy Mother exchanged their vows!" she said with sparkling eyes.

Huh? In the story Princess Noelle had told me, those two had not gotten married. Abel had defeated Iblis, and then he'd left to keep the world at peace...

Did this village have another story?

"Thank you for telling us!" Lucy exclaimed. "I'd love to go and see it!"

The story had gotten Lucy really excited.

I stole a glance at Rosalie. She was focused on the meal—this feast seemed like it'd keep going for a while.

"Want to check it out now?" I asked Lucy.

"Of course! It's not every day you get to come to the world tree!"

Well, normally we *couldn't* come, full stop. And, if we weren't careful, we'd

never be able to come again.

So, with that in mind, Lucy and I headed out of the village's back gate and walked along a small road. Well, it was more like a green tunnel than a road, though it felt different than walking through the forest.

Eventually we came to a clearing where the branches thinned and the sky was visible. This was a place where the huge boughs of the world tree protruded through the canopy, and it was a great spot to look out at the scenery below. You could see everything from the cradle of the tree.

"Wow...so this is the floating continent," I murmured.

"Are there clouds down there?" Lucy asked, her voice filled with wonder.

There were no clouds...but the ultramarine expanse we could see below us must've been the ocean. It really felt like we were flying, though not even Fujiyan's airship could come this far up. This was definitely the highest place in the world, and viewing the scenery from here was awe-inspiring.

We just stared out at it for a while.

"Hey, Makoto?" Lucy said, wrapping her arm around mine.

"Wh-What is it?" I asked.

"You know exactly what it is," she replied, looking at me through her lashes and pressing herself into me. I remembered what the avian girl had said. Then, Lucy giggled. "You're shaking for once."

"I-I am not," I protested, even as I felt my heart pound.

She looked up expectantly at me with bewitching eyes, arms sliding around my shoulders as she drew closer.

Will you propose to Lucy?

Yes

No

RPG Player was cutting off my escape here. I wasn't going to get away with

playing dumb.

Takatsuki?

Just then, I had a sudden vision of Sasa with a knife and a smile.



“Hey, you’re thinking about Aya!”

“No, I’m not,” I denied flatly.

“Liar! It’s written all over your face.”

“Am I seriously *that* transparent?”

Apparently, *Calm Mind* didn’t come with acting skills.

The words floating in the air helped me make up my mind.

“Lucy,” I said firmly, putting my hands on her shoulders.

“Makoto...” she replied, looking at me through misty eyes.

“Would you ma—”

Suddenly, my question was interrupted by a keening screech that sliced through my head.

Sense Danger? It’d been a while since the alarm had sounded so strong. The ground...well, tree, shook under our feet.

Lucy screamed and I turned toward the source of the tremors.

“Geh!”

My face twisted. There was a huge—almost ten meter long—caterpillar. It was almost like one of the monsters in a sentai series. Unlike a blight monster, it at least seemed to belong in this world, but the *size*... The tentacles writhing around made it look even worse.

“M-Makoto! What is it?! So gross!”

“A bug monster, I guess? It doesn’t look like it’s going to attack us.”

The massive caterpillar was munching on the leaves of the world tree. I didn’t particularly want to watch, but before I could decide whether to leave it alone or not, someone came up to us.

“Th-This is awful. That’s a dragon wyrm—a monster that feeds on the world tree!”

“You’re that girl...” I recognized her as the avian who’d told us about this spot. For a moment, I wondered why she was here, but then I realized... “You were

peeping, weren't you?"

"Eh, no way!" Lucy yelled, reddening.

"Tee hee," she giggled, sticking her tongue out. Well, she looked around the right age to be interested in romance.

"M-More importantly," she said, moving the conversation back to the wyrm. "If we leave it alone, it'll eat all the leaves, build a nest, and lay eggs. When they hatch, there'll be hundreds of them!"

So things were more dangerous than I'd thought.

"I'll go get Rosalie and the adults. Can you keep watch?!" she asked.

She raced off before waiting for our response.

Meanwhile, the huge caterpillar—the dragon wyrm—was munching away at the leaves. It wasn't interested in us, so maybe it was a herbivore? The response from *Sense Danger* meant we couldn't let our guard down, though.

"Well that killed the mood," I remarked.

"Why'd this have to happen?" Lucy griped. I dropped my hand on her head and patted her. Our current view wasn't the most pleasant, so I really hoped someone would come soon.

Then, the monster suddenly stopped eating, and its lower stomach began to glow. I saw countless red spheres, all pulsing ominously.

"Eggs..." I whispered, remembering the girl's comment.

If they hatched, the situation would be pretty dire... Rosalie and the villagers still weren't here.

"Wh-What do we do?" Lucy stammered. "Can we really just keep watching?"

I hesitated. If we wanted to attack, magic was our only choice. But, could I really blast magic all over the world tree? Lucy's fire magic would probably be effective, but she wasn't great at detail work—I didn't want to even think about possibly burning down this important place.

While I was thinking, the glow from the eggs was growing stronger. At this rate, one of the places linked to Anna the Holy Mother would be destroyed...

We'd have to do something.

"Lucy, I'm going to use elemental magic."

"What?!" she cried. "Will water magic work on it?"

I shook my head. "I'm going to use both water and fire. Lucy, I'll need your help."

She looked blankly at me for a moment until it hit her. She gasped. "Fire elementals... R-Right, I get it." She caught my signal and closed her eyes.

Lucy and I had fairly incompatible mana, so I couldn't just use *Synchro* with her. But...

I kissed her.

Red lights appeared around me—fire elementals. My *Contract* with Lucy let me see them. The water elementals I could already manipulate were around us too. I could now borrow strength from both types at the same time.

As a huge swell of mana gathered between the two of us, the caterpillar made a threatening noise. Apparently, it saw us as enemies now.

How to deal with it?

That was when strands, silken like those of a spiderweb, came *fwipping* through the air toward us. Guess the bug had taken the initiative.

"*Water Magic: Ice Barrier*," I said, blocking the strands just before they hit. The deflected threads bubbled where they hit the tree.

What the hell?!

Its silk is poisonous, Noah informed me. *If you touch it, you won't be walking it off.*

Poison? That was annoying. I offered a few words of thanks to the goddess as I tried to decide how to deal with this new threat.

Phoenix or *Yamata no Orochi* were both powerful, but they also damaged my surroundings, so I didn't really want to use them atop the world tree. What should I do?

Lucy's worried eyes were fixed on me. "Makoto..."

That was when one of the dragon wyrm's threads touched a fire elemental.
It burst into flames.

Will that...?

I'd been focusing entirely on borrowing their power, but maybe the elementals themselves could attack. In fact, perhaps I could just ask them...

"xxxxxxxxxxxx (Fire elementals, will you attack that monster, and only that monster?)"

Leave it to us! came a harmonious response.

The water elementals were watching and fidgeting—they were probably sulking that I wasn't talking with them. I'd have to ask them to do something too.

"xxxxxxxxxxxx (Water elementals, can you make sure the poison doesn't touch the world tree?)"

Right!

Now *that* was an energetic response.

The dragon wyrm keened in pain. It was currently burning, surrounded by fire elementals. However, the wood and leaves of the world tree were uncharred. The fire elementals were doing well with their attacks.

It's going great... So this is another way of using elemental magic, I thought.

People...used to use it this way, Noah said.

They did? I was surprised—no one had ever mentioned anything like that before.

You need the elementals to really like you, though, she added. *Guess they're fond of you.*

There was more to elemental magic than I'd thought...

By now, the wyrm was nearly dead. Its fruitless poison threads were being frozen by the water elementals, and the thing let out an unintelligible screech, breathing its last before thudding down sideways.

Phew, it was dead.

“Makoto...that’s amazing,” Lucy gushed. “You defeated a calamity level monster on your own.”

“No, I defeated it with you,” I said, trying to play it cool.

She just sighed, half-glaring at me. “All I did was get kissed by you.”

“Uh...”

But then, she wrapped her arms around me. “That was so cool.” She pushed me down and kissed me once more. “This man, so shamelessly stealing kisses.” She had a sharp expression, but her voice wasn’t angry at all. “You’re taking responsibility.”

“Yeah, of course,” I replied after a dazed second.

“Shall we carry on the conversation from earlier? Go on, say it.”

“N-Now?” She wanted me to propose while she was straddling me? I could foresee a long future of getting bossed around.

“Say, Lucy...” I said, putting my arms around her to match her body language.

“What is it, Makoto?”

“Oh?” interrupted a familiar voice. “Someone came to warn us about a monster, but here I just find my daughter playing around in public.”

“What?!”

“Mama?!”

Rosalie appeared right next to us and Lucy jumped away.

So...what was I supposed to say here...? “Rosalie, we defeated the monster,” I stated.

“They said it was a calamity...and you defeated it? Not bad. I guess I *can* trust you with Lucy!”

Then, the avian villagers joined in.

“You took down an adult dragon wyrm?”

“That’s amazing, mister!”

“Wow...”

After that, the young avians started dealing with the corpse. They seemed to know how to handle its poison too.

“Makoto, Lucy, well done,” said one of the avians. “Thank you for defeating the dragon wyrm.”

“I cannot believe we didn’t notice such a large one...”

“We need to strengthen our guard rotations.”

“The village owes you both, so please allow us to thank you.”

The mood was even more of a party than it’d been before. But, since we couldn’t stay too long without worrying the others, Lucy and I begged off early.



Rosalie teleported us back.

I’d only meant to get out of bed for a while and go for a walk, but Lucy and I had ended up going on a real adventure. Before she left, Rosalie said she was going drinking again. Maybe she was headed back to the avian village?

Sasa soon appeared in front of us.

“Where. Were. You. Two?”

Yeah... Upon seeing my empty bed (where I was supposed to be), she’d gotten angry.

“R-Rosalie took us sightseeing. She used teleportation, so I didn’t even push myself.”

“Th-That’s right,” Lucy said, backing me up. “Makoto needed a change of scenery.”

“My knight was fighting a calamity on the floating continent,” Furiae added.

“Princess?!”

“Fuuri?!”

How did she know?!

“I used *Postcognition*,” she answered. “It’s not something I’m particularly

skilled in, but it seems like I was right.”

Ack... She'd baited us.

“Let's *chat* then,” Sasa fumed.

“Aya! I'm not going to run, let go! Also, don't grab me there!”

Sasa had a firm grip on Lucy as the elf squirmed.

“I want to hear this as well,” said Furiae. “You're supposed to be my guardian knight, and yet you're gallivanting off to who-knows-where. I want to know *everything*.” She grabbed my arm. *So tight...* I couldn't shake her off at all.

“You're not getting away,” Sasa trilled.

“You can't even just remain silent,” declared Furiae. “My fate magic will tell me everything.”

I didn't even have the right to remain silent?! At their mercy, Lucy and I ended up in a particularly tough interrogation.

That night, Princess Sophia appeared after finishing her meetings with the leaders.

“I heard what happened. You were told you needed rest, and yet you slipped out instead and got scolded for it. Really, you can't sit still? You defeated a demon lord, so why not take a break?”

“I just went out for a walk.”

“You can hardly call going to another continent and fighting a calamity ‘a walk.’”

Well...guess my boss had found out all the details... I considered trying to claim that Rosalie dragging me along had been an act of god...but I found myself pushed back into the bed. Eyes like chips of ice stared me down.

“I want you to go to Great Keith next. Yet, I cannot shake this worry...so I will be joining you.”

“S-Sophia? Are you mad?”

“I am not. I am a priestess, after all.”

I scratched my cheek. That wasn't really a reason... She was *definitely* mad.

"What's Great Keith like?" I asked, trying to change the topic.

"It borders Roses, but our climates are completely different. It has wide swathes of desert, and its towns are built around oases. Water is a valuable resource. The people there also mine precious stones and ore, so they do a lot of trading."

"They're a military country, right? Even the royal family is in the army."

"That's right. Great Keith is a hard land and climate to live in, so the monsters are commensurately stronger. The military is indispensable in the protection of the people that live there."

"A harsh climate... So it doesn't rain much?"

I knew some of those details since I'd seen quests in Great Keith offered while adventuring in Macallan. To me, the most important fact was about rainfall—there wasn't much of it, which meant few water elementals.

"Without the water elementals, I'm not going to be able to do much," I warned her.

"I won't ask the impossible of you, so don't worry," she replied with a smile.

Great Keith was our next destination, and it was the worst country for my specialty.

So you're heading to a place without elementals... Noah said in my mind. *I'm worried.*

Be careful, Mako. No dying☆

Thanks for the encouragement, goddesses...but that feels like tempting fate.

I'd just pray for a peaceful journey.

Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you for picking up volume six of *Zero Believers*. Our setting for this volume was Lucy's home of Springrogue.

I wanted to make a romp...of Makoto becoming a hero in this other world and fighting against the demon lord. However, as those of you who have read the volume know, things didn't quite go that way. Rosalie is the key figure in this volume. She's one of the top three mages on the continent and the closest to a "problem child" in the series. I had envisioned her character from the beginning, and now I've finally managed to bring her into the story. Though, I did forget about that famous game that has an elf character named Rosalie. Remember to google your names when you think of them.

Overall, we're around halfway through the story. Next time: Great Keith, the fourth country.

Finally, I want to thank Tam-U for the always-amazing illustrations, Hakuto Shiroi—who is responsible for the *Zero Believers* manga—and my editor, N. Apologies for all the barely made deadlines. I also want to thank all of my readers of both the published and online versions, and I ask for your continued support.

Noah

"CUTE,
RIGHT?"



Full Clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with Zero
Believers

6

The Crimson Witch and the Undead King

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U



Rosalie

Lucy

"OW
OWOW!
MAMA!
STOP!"

"I TOLD
YOU NOT TO
TALK ABOUT
MY AGE!"



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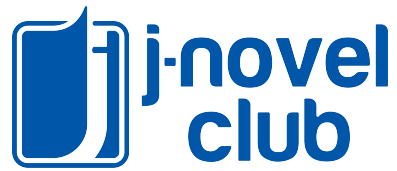
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Full Clearing Another World under a Goddess with Zero Believers: Volume 6

by Isle Osaki

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Edited by C.D. Leeson

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